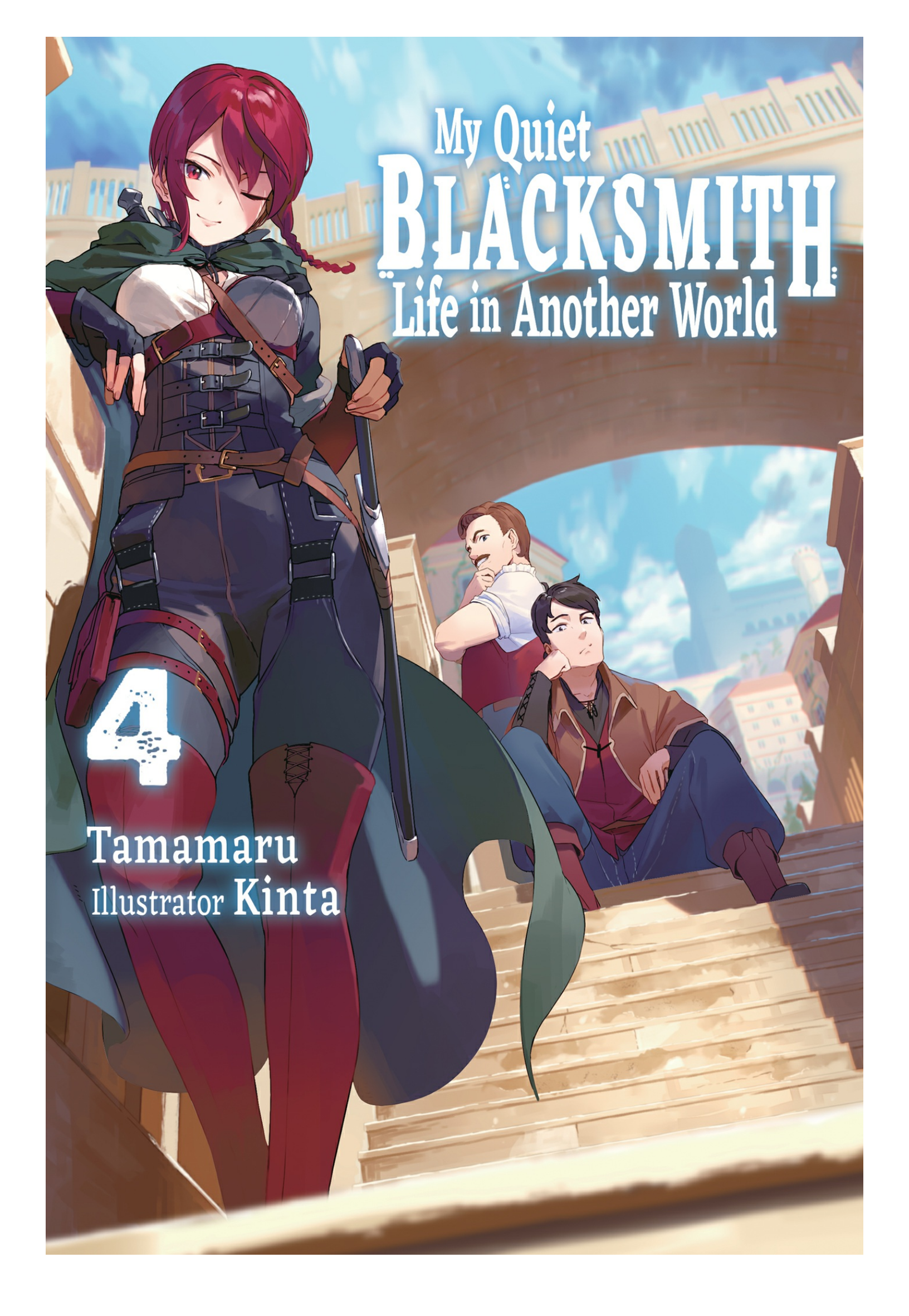


My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World

4

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta

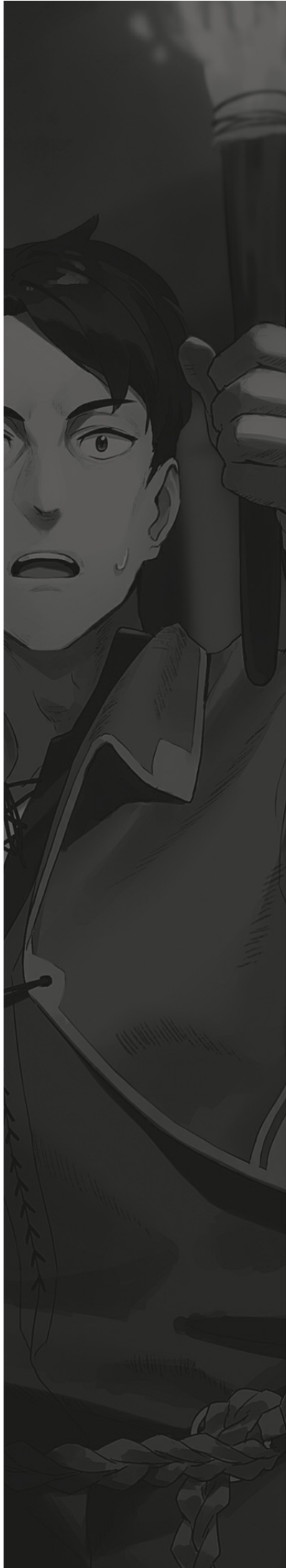


The illustration depicts a young woman with red hair in pigtails, wearing a dark blue dress with red accents and a green cape. She stands on a wooden bridge, holding a large blacksmith's hammer. In the background, two men are sitting on the bridge; one is looking at the woman, and the other is looking away. The setting is a medieval-style town with stone buildings and a blue sky with clouds.

My Quiet **BLACKSMITH** Life in Another World

4

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Prologue: The Visitor

In this world, there is a forest dense with trees. Beneath the canopy, it is dark even when the sun is at its peak. Monstrous bears and packs of whip-smart wolves roam freely within its confines. Inexperienced travelers who find themselves lost within the forest's labyrinthine depths have not a single prayer of finding an escape.

This place is called the Black Forest.

A young man made his way through the forest. Of slim physique, he nonetheless radiated inner strength, and though his features were handsome, they were not without flaws.

He was traveling alone, heading to a certain destination in the middle of the forest. Though he was only halfway through his journey, he'd already been attacked by wolves, boars, and bears. He'd managed to escape every one of his pursuers, but the fatigue of fleeing was written all over his face.

"A run-of-the-mill tradesman lives in this accursed place?" the man muttered, taking a drink from the water pouch strapped to his hip. "Ha! What a joke."

He wanted nothing more than to set up camp and rest, but given the trials he had already overcome, it would've been naive to believe that nighttime was going to be any safer. In fact, it was likely just the opposite—darkness came with its own dangers.

The young man judged that it would be best to continue toward his goal—even if it meant exhausting himself—so press onward he did, step by bitter step.

His destination was a certain blacksmith's forge.

The man wanted to commission a weapon that could rival...no...*outstrip* the Demon Queen's own in battle. He knew exactly what kind of weapon he wanted—a blade that would summon thunder when he brandished it or rouse a

tempest with every swing. To put it simply, he wanted a god-tier weapon.

If actual divinity was out of reach, the young man would settle for a weapon of equal strength to the Demon Queen's. But how many smiths could accomplish such a feat? A legendary weapon could only be forged by craftsmen with legendary skills.

When whispers of a newly christened Dragonslayer had found the youth's ears, he'd been beside himself with delight. Any weapon that could pierce a dragon's hide, which was likened to an iron wall, surely deserved to be called legendary.

As soon as he heard these rumors, he rushed over to the Dragonslayer's home. Even if he wasn't able to procure the actual dragon-slaying weapon, the young man decided that he would be satisfied with just knowing its origin; he'd already confirmed that the sword wasn't an artifact that'd been dug out of some maze or ruin. He needed only to know the sword's maker...the person to whom he could plead his case.

The youth spent months, long after the majority of the petitioners had given up, pestering the Dragonslayer for information. Finally, the Dragonslayer acquiesced and gave him a hint as to where he could acquire a weapon of similar caliber.

The Dragonslayer told him, "First, you must pay a visit to the merchant. If he deems you worthy, he will tell you the location of the blacksmith."

This merchant knew where the smith lived. Perhaps the smith was retained by the merchant. After all, a craftsman who could forge weapons of such might was worth any amount of gold to keep.

The youth gave his thanks and stood to leave, but the Dragonslayer left him with one final warning: "Obtaining the smith's whereabouts from the merchant is not the end of the journey. It is only the starting line."

In the city, the merchant gave the youth a series of trials. He bested them all, and the prize for these victories was information about the blacksmith's location.

The Black Forest.

Upon learning his destination, the young man finally understood the warning from the Dragonslayer...or at least, he thought he had. In his heart, he'd foolishly believed that, regardless of the Black Forest's notoriety, any place where a blacksmith could live wouldn't be *too* dangerous.

The young man's experience in the forest taught him otherwise. "I was naive," he muttered.

Long after the sun had set, he finally emerged into a clearing. Before him stood a cabin. The dwelling was large and out of place in the forest. However, light spilled from the windows, so there was no doubt that people lived there.

The cabin was not the only unusual thing—the young man sensed that he was being watched by at least two different presences. Here and there, he caught hints of a third, which was skillfully disguised.

"This is the worst..." Cold sweat slid down the man's back. He knew he'd be dead the moment he so much as twitched a finger out of place.

"I have no intentions to harm you!" the young man called out. "I've only come to commission a weapon!"

The next moment, a human melted from the shadows into the moonlight. This man was of medium height and build, and his movements were relaxed and loose as if he'd just come home from taking a stroll. He had a northern-style blade strapped to his waist, which was the only sign that he might not have been as docile as his appearance suggested. Under different circumstances, the youth wouldn't have believed that the man standing before him could survive out here in the Black Forest.

The man spoke with a voice that was quiet but solemn. "I am Eizo, the proprietor of this workshop," he began, before smiling. "Lately, we've seen our share of rowdy visitors. Please, come in—welcome to our forge."

The young man let out a sigh of relief. Any bloodthirst he'd felt directed at him had disappeared, and he would live on to see another day. He did as Eizo had instructed and entered the cabin.

The next day, the youth sat across from Eizo in the workspace. Face-to-face, Eizo certainly looked like no more than a regular blacksmith.

Thinking back to the disquieting events from the previous night, the young man still felt a bit shocked. The initial hostility he'd sensed upon entering the clearing hadn't come from Eizo, but rather, from Eizo's wives...or whatever the relationship between them all was. Today, the women were running around the forge, preparing for the work ahead.

He'd also been startled by the luxuriousness of the guest room they'd put him up in. It was on par with a room he'd once used in the royal palace. When he'd asked about the lavish decorations, he'd been told that they were all gifts of one sort or another.

They might've been gifts...but they were certainly not the kind of items you'd expect a blacksmith living out in the woods to be receiving.

The youth explained his request to the astonishing—on multiple fronts—man before him. When he finished, Eizo simply said, “I see,” and stroked his chin out of habit. He then glanced through the notes he'd jotted down on a pad.

Seeing Eizo's dissatisfied expression, the youth furrowed his brow. “Is it beyond your ability after all?”

Eizo shrugged and shook his head. “Not at all.”

The two men had taken a liking to each other, so their exchange was casual and easy.

“I can forge it,” Eizo continued, taking a sip from his cup. “The problem lies not in my skills, but rather, that I lack the materials to make what you seek.”

“Materials?” the youth echoed.

Eizo nodded. “I would need orichalcum.”

The young man swallowed heavily. Even children knew how valuable orichalcum was as a metal.

“I could make you a weapon before the day was out if I had the requisite materials on hand, but alas...” Eizo said.

“Is that so...” the young man replied. It wasn't impossible to bring orichalcum

here to the forge; however, he'd need to reprise his journey through the forest. The youth sighed.

"On the upside, if you bring me orichalcum, I can have the weapon you desire finished in no time at all."

The young man brightened at Eizo's assurance that his dream weapon was so near at hand. Yet the Dragonslayer's warning about the "starting line" echoed in his mind.

"I'll secure a stash as soon as I can," the youth swore.

"Be careful," Eizo said. "By the way, I am away from the forge on occasion. You can confirm my whereabouts with the merchant who told you about this place."

"Got it."

The two shook hands, and the young man wasted no time rushing to his room, grabbing his belongings, and setting out. He had no desire to revisit the terrors of the nighttime forest by dallying any longer.

After seeing the young man off, Eizo returned to the workshop. Looking down at the memo pad, he sighed heavily. "At least I've bought myself some time."

It was true that he would need orichalcum to forge the weapon the youth had come to commission, and it was also true that the precious metal was not so easy to find. However, the forge did actually have enough orichalcum stocked up, at least enough to fulfill the youth's request. In truth, Eizo had only sent him on the supply quest as a stalling tactic. The reason he'd gone to such lengths was written down on the pad.

"They're two birds of a feather... It's a good thing they just missed each other."

Written on the paper was a memo about a different commission...one for a rapier.

Eizo scratched his head, staring down at his own writing. "I suppose I'll start by making the Demon Queen's sword."

Chapter 1: Forest Friend

There were a number of forests in this world, the largest of which was the Black Forest. Aside from its size, the Black Forest also had a reputation for being treacherous.

It was also where my forge happened to be located. This place was my home, and it'd been gifted to me by an interdimensional being called a Watchdog, who'd offered me a second chance at life in this world. I had also been granted cheat abilities, which primarily pertained to blacksmithing, but I had skills in production and fighting as well. Basic data about this world and its customs had also been installed in my mind.

Most of the time, our work consisted of holing up in the workshop and focusing on smithing. However, today, three (and a half) members of the forge were out hunting. Leading the hunt was Samya, a tiger-type beastfolk who I'd saved from the brink of death; Diana—the young lady of a comital family who'd moved in with us after I helped settle a family dispute—had gone with her. Lidy was an elf whose village had been devastated by monsters, and Krul was our family's drake—they had also gone out (mostly to take a walk), but were acting as support.

I, on the other hand, was spending the day in the forge with Rike, my dwarven apprentice. The two of us started out by forging knives. The core steps in this process were to heat up the plate metal and hammer it out.

Thanks to my cheats, I'd always worked quickly and efficiently, but I had gotten slightly faster at making knives. Perhaps forging a katana had granted me some extra experience.

Had I been able to level up my skills from the beginning? Or was my body just starting to get used to the work? Well, I wasn't sure about the exact reasons...but knowing that I had the capacity to improve, I resolved to work hard and become more skilled.

Rike and I worked like well-oiled machines. By the time Samya and the others

returned, we'd produced a large number of knives. Our stockpile was definitely more than what we used to be able to produce in a day.

"Boss, have you gotten faster?" Rike asked me.

"It feels that way." If Rike had noticed, then it wasn't just my imagination. "The hammering technique is slightly different for a katana, but I must've learned something from that experience that applies to knife-making too," I mused.

"So then, the more types of weapons you make, the faster you'll become," said Rike, as if it were the logical conclusion. "You're amazing, Boss."

Her statement got me thinking... Rike's supposition was that I could grow my cheats by expanding my range. That was one hypothesis I hadn't considered, but it was certainly worth testing. I had to focus on fulfilling our delivery quota this week, but once we finished, I could allocate the next two weeks for experimentation.

As Rike and I started tidying up the forge, Samya and the others returned. It was later than they usually got back; I wondered if they'd stayed out longer because they had to follow prey deeper into the forest.

"Welcome home," I said to them.

"We're back," Samya replied.

"Catch anything big today?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, a large boar," she answered, distracted.

She was unusually quiet. Normally, Samya would be brimming with excitement and eager to brag about her kills, especially if they'd taken down large game.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Did something happen?"

"Not exactly..." she muttered unconvincingly.

Lidy jumped in to answer for her. "We saw tracks left by a large black bear."

"A bear, huh?" I replied. "I'll be on the lookout when I go to the lake for water. We might also have to build a fence around Krul's hut to stop a bear

from getting in.”

Diana had been quiet until now, but she spoke up. “The three of us discussed it on the way back—it doesn’t seem like the bear will come near anytime soon.”

“So there’s no immediate emergency then? That’s a relief.”

“I heard that you killed the last bear when it became a threat,” Lidy said.

“Yeah, that’s right.” Our showdown hadn’t been that long ago, but it felt like it’d been forever.

“The tracks brought back Samya’s memory of that time,” Diana explained. “That’s why she’s so…”

“I see.”

During that fight, I had been severely wounded—my most serious injury since coming to this world. While the hobgoblin I’d fought was undoubtedly stronger in terms of power, I’d had allies supporting me then, whereas I’d fought the bear alone. That had been a battle with both our lives on the line.

Samya had witnessed the aftermath of that fight, and she’d seen my injuries firsthand, so those experiences might’ve traumatized her. I hoped she’d be able to slowly overcome her fears. After all, I was back in tip-top shape now.

“Part of living in the forest means coming to terms with the possibility of running into dangerous animals,” I reasoned.

“Right. Lidy said that they won’t approach except on rare occasions, but it’s not unheard of for a boar to tear up a field,” said Diana. Lidy nodded along.

“First and foremost, everyone here, including me, needs to be careful. It’s rare for wild animals to be corrupted and turn into monsters, but it happens. The moment you think you’re safe, that’s when you’re in the most danger.” At my words of caution, everyone nodded back.

What did living in this forest truly entail? What did it mean to live alongside nature? Those were questions we had to face every day.

Over dinner, we discussed the threat of the bear at greater length and decided against building a fence for Krul. If a bear should somehow manage to get through the fence, god forbid Krul be trapped inside and unable to get out.

Better to leave Krul free so she could run away if she needed to. Not only would she have a higher chance of survival that way, but she might also be able to warn us of coming danger. Krul was smart that way.

###

The next morning, all five of us and Krul went to recover the spoils of the hunt. The boar was enormous, but with Krul's help, we had no trouble dragging it out of the lake and back to the cabin.

The bear tracks Samya and the others saw yesterday were still fresh in everyone's minds. We were all more alert to our surroundings than usual, but we didn't run into any trouble on the way to the lake or on the way back. Samya didn't say anything on the trip home, so I assumed she didn't see any fresh tracks either.

In times like these, it would've been useful to have long-range weapons and projectiles so that we could attack any bear from outside its reach. I'd been putting it off, but perhaps it was time to try my hand at making a bow. I could also stand to increase our inventory of short spears.

Back at the cabin, we followed our usual routine of skinning the boar and separating the meat from the bones. Considering the size of the boar, it would provide us plenty of sustenance.

For lunch, I'd originally wanted to try my hand at making a Japanese-style pork (boar) steak, but I didn't have any soy sauce or garlic. I'd already requested soy sauce from Camilo, so there was nothing more I could do besides wait for him to find some. For now, I settled on grilling the meat with herbs and brandy, which imbued deep flavor into it.

In the afternoon, I went back to the forge to continue smithing. Rike and Lidy were doing some magical training (and garden maintenance) outside. Samya and Diana were sewing, a skill they'd both gotten really proficient at recently; they could quickly darn small holes and make the cloth look good as new. Unfortunately, for clothing with large tears, we still had no choice but to buy replacements.

Come to think of it, does repairing clothing count as production related? Woodworking and cooking both count, so I see no reason why sewing wouldn't.

One of these days, I should try making some clothing for myself.

When I listed out everything I needed to do and wanted to do, I felt overwhelmed with the possibilities. There was just *so much* I wanted to try!

A quiet life out here sounded good in theory, but it meant that we had to be entirely self-sufficient: Vegetables had to be grown ourselves. Meat had to be butchered ourselves. We had to do everything we would've otherwise counted on others to do.

Obviously, that meant we had less free time, so there were pros and cons. I didn't necessarily yearn for my previous life where I could find everything I needed in a five-block radius. However, in order to achieve my dream of a peaceful life, I still had to—and wanted to—rely on others for help sometimes.

I had another efficient day in the workshop, making roughly enough knives to fulfill a week's quota by the end of the day. Suffice to say, I was pleased with my progress.

Yet, regrettably, I couldn't make us a fortune by churning out elite model knives day and night; the unfortunate truth was that they didn't sell very well. Otherwise, I could've freed up some time for myself by focusing all smithing efforts on knives.

In any case, there was no point in dwelling on such an unrealistic plan. I tidied up the workshop as I considered my priorities as a blacksmith.

###

For the next few days, I continued working on Camilo's standing order, and it took me about a week to forge everything. Camilo and I had come to an agreement on our way back from the expedition—my schedule would be reduced to one delivery every two weeks. This gave me a week's worth of wiggle room to do as I liked. We also still had meat in storage, so there was no need to go out hunting.

I decided that we would spend a leisurely day in the forest.

To the five of us, being in the forest was like taking a stroll...but at the end of the day, the Black Forest was still a dangerous place, so we had to maintain a

base level of caution. The bear that had almost taken Samya's life—the reason she'd come to live with me in the first place—was still roaming around, meaning that the forest was risky territory. Therefore, we always had to be armed and ready.

Before we headed out, everyone geared up with their weapon of choice. Samya hefted her bow over her shoulder; Diana and I had strapped swords to our waists. Rike brought a short spear with her. She didn't exactly have high proficiency with it, but it was the easiest weapon for her to wield given her lack of fighting experience. A bow was a highly technical weapon, and a sword required you to get in close to your target. With a spear, Rike could keep her distance.

Krul came along with us too. It would've been unthinkable to leave her by herself.

If we encountered any danger, hopefully Rike and Krul would be able to escape first. I told Rike to run at the first sign of peril and extracted a reluctant promise from her to do so. When I conveyed the same thing to Krul, I got a "*kululu*" back in response; whether that was an affirmative or a negative was anyone's guess. But I'd seen Diana nodding to back me up, so I assumed that I could count on Krul's cooperation. Krul was a good girl who listened to Mama Diana.

Our goal for the day wasn't to fish or hunt but just to explore the surroundings and bring anything back that looked edible. Rike and I were amateurs at foraging, but Samya and Diana had memorized the major landmarks in the area during their regular hunting trips. Using those markers, they would be able to keep track of our location.

The trip served several other purposes as well: For one, I wanted to check for escape routes and any strategic locations we could leverage in case we were attacked. I also wanted to make sure nothing unusual was going on in the forest. Lastly, on a lighter note, I thought it was the perfect opportunity to check for newly formed hot springs or any other windfalls.

Honestly though, I couldn't deny that the biggest reason for the field trip was simply to trigger a change in mood.

We wrapped up our preparations and set off into the forest.

It was dark under the canopy. The sun was shining high in the sky, but its rays weren't able to pierce through the foliage of the tall trees looming all around us. Tiny flowers bloomed here and there, growing off what little light filtered through the leaves; they looked terribly lonely.

As we proceeded farther into the forest's depths, Lidy started to point out herbs that were different from the fever-reducers and coagulants we normally harvested. She taught us about one that was effective for headaches. "As expected of Lidy!" is what I wanted to say, but I wasn't sure if it was appropriate.

We picked those herbs and placed them into a basket that Krul was helping us carry. Krul chirped happily at being entrusted with the task, and her chirrup reminded me of a question I'd been curious about for a while. I took the opportunity to probe Lidy for possible answers.

"Krul hasn't eaten much since she came to live with us here, but Camilo said she'd had a huge appetite when she'd been in his shop," I explained. "Do you have any idea why?"

Lidy was an elf, and elven bodies were partially made of magic...or so I'd heard. I figured that if anyone would know, it would be her.

"Has Krul shown any signs of being unwell?" she asked.

"She's always behaved exactly as you see her now."

It'd been a while since Krul had joined our family, and in that time, she'd never fallen ill. She was always a limitless bundle of energy.

Lidy reached out toward Krul. "Pardon me," she said.

Krul closed her eyes and trilled quietly, probably expecting to be pet. My shoulder was subject to a beating (courtesy of Diana) because of how cute the scene was.

After a short while, Lidy declared, "She's fine."

"Really?"

“Yes, I can sense that magic is circulating through her system properly,” she explained. “This child can use magic as sustenance instead of food. In that way, she resembles elves.”

“Aaah, so she’s a dragon after all.”

Lidy nodded. “Yes, that must be part of it. The blood tie is weak, but she is certainly a descendant.”

“Then there’s no need for me to worry?”

“None at all,” Lidy said.

Hearing Lidy’s diagnosis, Diana seemed relieved too.

Looks like I’ve been worrying for nothing...but I’m glad there isn’t anything wrong. Besides that, I didn’t know that magic could act as a substitute for food. Krul must’ve had to eat more at Camilo’s because the concentration of magic in the city is low.

Krul was still considered young for her species, but she’d already grown taller than me. The fact that a creature Krul’s size could be sustained entirely by the magic surrounding us was proof of how much power was in the Black Forest.

After walking around for a while longer, we found a clearing that was perfect for taking our lunch break. We were just about to settle in when Samya perked up, nose twitching as she sniffed the air.

“Do you smell something?” I asked.

She tilted her head in a questioning manner. “The air carries the scent of a wolf. Usually, they roam in packs, but I only smell one.”

“Did it stray from a pack?”

“It doesn’t feel that way to me,” she replied.

Given the forest wolves’ reputation for having superior intellect, encountering a lone wolf that was neither a stray nor a scout didn’t sound like particularly good news.

I was about to propose that we look for another place to eat lunch when Samya spoke again, satisfaction evident in her voice. “Oh. It’s *her*.” She brought

her index finger and thumb to her mouth and whistled sharply.

I didn't know she could whistle with her fingers!

We heard a return whistle coming from off in the distance, followed by the rustling of brushwood that rapidly grew louder. Whatever was coming, it wasn't small. But Samya didn't look worried at all, so the rest of us relaxed as we waited.

With one last noisy rustle, a wolf peeked out of the bushes before us. Well...not a wolf per se, but a person with wolfish features. In other words, a wolf-type beastfolk.

Our visitor stared back at us. Most of the tension drained from her body, but there were still traces of wariness on her face. She knew Samya, but we were a large group, and the rest of us were strangers to her.

Samya raised a hand in greeting and called out, "Jolanda!"

Jolanda ambled toward us, but she didn't drop her guard. She was armed with a bow and carried a rucksack, probably geared for long-distance travel.

"Come to think of it, this is my first time meeting any beastfolk besides Samya." It had been a while since I'd first come to live in this forest, but I'd never encountered another human before, let alone one of the beastfolk. Of course, that said more about how often I left the house than anything about the inhabitants of the Black Forest...

"It's my first time too," Diana said. "We've never met anyone during our hunts."

She and Samya roamed pretty far from the cabin on their hunting and their foraging trips. Since they'd never encountered anyone, I figured that this kind of chance meeting was rare, truly once in a blue moon.

I called to mind the canine-type beast folk I'd seen in the capital. Those people's atmosphere had been gentle and soft. Jolanda, on the other hand, felt like the complete opposite. Was it the difference between city dwellers and forest dwellers, or was there a deeper reason behind the gap?

"You know her name. Are you two close?" I asked Samya, keeping my eyes on

Jolanda as she stalked slowly closer.

They were both beastfolk. Perhaps their territories had been near each other.

Samya nodded and answered cryptically, "Something like that."

Jolanda stopped a short distance away from us, far enough that she could turn tail and escape if one of us tried to jump her. She might've known Samya, but she treated the rest of us—complete strangers to her—with extreme caution.

First things first: I've got to introduce myself.

I bowed my head. "Hello, my name is Eizo. I operate a forge out of this forest. It's a pleasure to meet..." I trailed off, seeing Jolanda's brows furrow in response to my greeting. She was throwing quick glances at Samya.

"He's not lying," Samya said. "I thought he was having me on at first too. I'm living with him now, so rest assured, he's telling the truth."

Jolanda's eyes widened. She was probably shocked to find out that a blacksmith operated in the Black Forest of all places.

"You're living...?" Jolanda was too shocked to finish her question.

Samya blushed. "Wh-Wh-What about it?" she stuttered out. "You got a problem?"

"I didn't say anything," Jolanda remarked with a sly smile. She was starting to relax more and came closer toward us, a move which didn't go unnoticed by Samya.

Samya suddenly shot forward and slung an arm around Jolanda's neck before she could back away again. "Just come here already!" She dragged Jolanda closer, and it was hard to tell from Jolanda's expression whether she was troubled by Samya's actions or not.

"This guy's Eizo, like he said," Samya told her, beginning a round of introductions and pointing to each of us in turn with her free hand. "Rike is the dwarf, Lidy is the elf, and last but not least, that's Diana."

Immobilized as she was, Jolanda could only look at us, her eyes darting wildly around. She didn't even have the freedom to nod, so she bowed with her eyes.

Since she'd first appeared, Jolanda had been glancing around at her surroundings as if she couldn't help herself.

Is she just hyper wary by nature?

Samya seemed to have noticed Jolanda's behavior too. Puzzled, she asked, "What's been bugging you? D'ya sense something?"

That confirms my suspicions. There's more to Jolanda's restlessness than it being her natural disposition.

Jolanda hesitated, peeking at the rest of us. Was whatever she had to say difficult to express in front of strangers?

"Should we leave?" I asked.

Samya shook her head. "Nah, it's fine." Then, she said to Jolanda, "You still haven't gotten over your shyness?"

Jolanda gave a minute nod of her head.



Oh, she's just shy! I guess living in this forest doesn't exactly provide a lot of opportunities for meeting new people. She might've just been at a loss as to how to interact with us. Besides beastfolk and humans, there was a dwarf and an elf in our party.

"Is it something you can't say in front of others?" Samya asked in a gentle voice.

Jolanda shook her head vigorously. "N-No, it's not that," she said, shooting glances at us. "Actually, it's better if everyone knows."

She seemed like she'd be more comfortable if we left, but if it was something we should hear, then I figured we should stay.

Samya urged her to continue. "What is it then?"

"There's... There's a large black bear roaming the area," Jolanda stated.

Everyone's expressions turned serious.

A large black bear was behind Samya's almost fatal wounds...the reason she'd come to live with me. I'd fought another one in a battle to the death, and it hadn't possessed a single iota of fear toward humans.

Samya and Diana had seen fresh tracks just yesterday. There was a possibility that they'd been made by the same bear that Jolanda was talking about.

"I managed to run away," Jolanda continued, "but it drove me from my den."

Samya was silent.

I looked around at the others, meeting everyone's gaze one by one. I received nods from everyone.

"Excuse me, Jolanda?" I began.

Jolanda yelped.

I hadn't meant to scare her... I knew that I looked menacing to others, *I knew that*, but I was still a little hurt at her startled reaction.

Now's not the time to get depressed!

"Don't worry," I said, carefully keeping my voice level. "We don't bite."

Jolanda nodded quietly.

“If it’s okay with you, why don’t you come live with us for the time being?” I suggested. “If nothing else, it’ll give you time to compose yourself. Like Samya said, she’s staying with me too, so you don’t have to worry.”

Actually, *I* was the one who was (greatly) outnumbered in the house since I was the only man. I *was* still the head of the household though.

Jolanda glanced at Samya, who gave her a firm nod. Jolanda’s gaze flicked between the rest of us. Everyone else also nodded back encouragingly, and all the support seemed to give Jolanda a sense of relief.

She acquiesced with a bow of her head and a voice that was barely audible.

“I’ll stay with you.”

We decided to put off lunch and return to the cabin. Along the way, I asked Samya and Jolanda how they knew each other. They told me that they’d lived close to one another since birth.

“So you’re childhood friends?” I asked.

“Y-Yes,” Jolanda replied.

Then...are there villages where the beastfolk live?

I immediately asked Samya about my theory, but she shot it down. “Nope, that’s not it.”

“Really?”

“Beastfolk live in dens with our families,” she explained. “Jolanda just happened to live close by.”

“There aren’t any areas where two or more families live together?”

“Not really.”

It made sense, I guess—there was plenty of space in the Black Forest, so everyone could claim as much territory as they wanted.

On a related subject, the expansive nature of the forest would be a boon if we were ever attacked. For example, the black bear could never take us all down as long as we scattered in different directions. If the black bear was a flesh and

blood animal, it would give up its chase once it filled its stomach. But on the other hand, a bear corrupted by magic wasn't guaranteed to behave like a regular animal.

"Having a childhood friend must be rare among beastfolk," I said.

"Yeah," Samya replied. "Sometimes we make friends while roaming around—like when we run into other beastfolk by chance—but it's uncommon to have a friend who lives nearby."

"I want to hear all about Samya's childhood antics and mishaps," I said to Jolanda in a teasing tone.

"W-Wait a sec!" Samya protested. She seemed flustered by the turn of events, like she hadn't anticipated I'd ask something like that.

Jolanda laughed. "Once, she jumped off a tree. She got an earful for that one."

I had no trouble imagining that at all.

Samya's face turned tomato red. "Jolanda! Don't!"

"Well? Is it true?" I asked.

Samya squirmed. "Th-That's..."

She didn't need to be so embarrassed, really. I also had one or two stories from when I was a snot-nosed brat...and I doubted that I was the only one. Of the women, Diana surely had a few tales of mischief tucked under her belt.

Jolanda snickered at Samya's discomfort. Rike, Diana, and Lidya were grinning too. In fact, I'd never seen such a broad smile on Diana's face before. Samya blushed even harder at that, fighting to find the words to tell Jolanda off.

With our laughter accompanying us, we continued onward to the cabin.

Back at home, we relieved Krul of our spoils from the trip. When we entered the cabin, Jolanda timidly murmured, "Sorry to bother you all."

"It's not a problem," I said. "We have a guest room you can use, and if you have questions, don't hesitate to ask Samya or any of the others."

“O-Okay. Thank you.” Jolanda responded with a bow.

It was best that the four women of the house helped her with her needs. As a man, there were things that I was oblivious to...and there were likely to be some topics that she wouldn't want to discuss with a guy anyway.

So, I waved to her and then returned to my room.

For lunch, I served soup along with the meals I'd packed for us to eat on the go. Of course, Jolanda joined us at the table too.

“Sorry to make you cook for me,” she said.

“I always cook extra,” I replied, “so it's no trouble at all.”

Rike averted her eyes. She was the biggest eater in the family, sure, but she wasn't the only one—everyone in our household was a bit of a glutton.

While we ate, I asked Jolanda about the black bear she'd encountered. “Did it actively chase after you?”

She shook her head. “No. After I fled my den, it didn't come after me. But...it didn't seem to be looking for food either... Maybe it'd been looking for a place to rest and just happened to find my home.”

“That sounds similar to our bear encounter...” I mumbled. The black bear I'd fought hadn't been hunting for food either. Considering what I'd learned from Lidy about animals tainted by magic, I concluded that the bear Jolanda had run into was no longer normal.

It had likely already been corrupted...or, at least, it was currently undergoing that transformation.

“I don't know if it's fully turned or still turning, but we should kill it while we can,” I told Jolanda. If magic had coalesced within the bear, then sooner or later, it would become a threat to the creatures in this forest. There was also no guarantee that it would leave our home alone.

“I-Is that possible?” Jolanda asked fearfully.

Samya, wearing an inordinately cocky expression, cut in and boasted, “Eizo's done it once before! He'll do it again!”

Jolanda seemed surprised. “Really?”

“You bet!” Samya exclaimed, puffing her chest out with pride.

I didn’t know why Samya was the one acting smug, but I let it slide—she looked like she was having fun, and she hadn’t said anything untrue.

“Then we should slay it as soon as possible,” Lidy interjected. Her voice was quiet but firm. “If all of us work together, we can stop it before it does any real damage.”

“I-I see,” Jolanda stammered, looking slightly intimidated.

“If we’re in agreement, then let’s try to take it down. I’ll go alone.” I paused, sighing. “Well...that’s what I want to say, but none of you are gonna let me do that, are you?”

If it was at all possible, I didn’t want to expose my family to any danger...but the others were glaring daggers at me. As the head of the household, I *could* overrule their votes, but our family had grown larger, and I didn’t want to abuse my privilege.

I was worried about their safety...but they were all worried about mine too.

“All right, all right, fine,” I relented. “We’ll all go together tomorrow.”

I’d been shortsighted. To prepare for this eventuality, I should’ve made bows and spears in advance. I was kicking myself—after my last bear fight, I should’ve thought farther ahead.

But there was no use regretting things now. A bow might be impossible to craft in the time remaining in the day, but I could forge some knives and maybe even a makeshift spear—anything that could help us emerge from tomorrow’s hunt unharmed.

Leaving Jolanda with Samya and the others, I shut myself up in the workshop.

The first order of business was to go to the whetstone and sharpen the edges of any knives that we hadn’t yet affixed handles to. With my abilities, and especially with my cheats active, I could make knives that were sharp enough for both slashing and stabbing.

Samya, Lidy, and Jolanda were archers. Rike and Diana were the only ones

who needed spears, so my target for the day was two spears.

It would be difficult to forge custom models with the time I had, so I settled for elite models. The spears I wanted to make would have relatively short hafts—anything longer would be hard to wield in the dense forest.

I cut the hafts out of some thick tree branches; we always collected plenty when we harvested trees for lumber. Using my own custom model knife, I whittled down two branches until they were smooth and beautiful. Then, I sliced an incision into one end of each branch-turned-haft—this would enable me to slot in the sharpened knives as spear tips. I secured the knives with leather strips, making sure that they wouldn't fall out, and voila! The two spears were complete.

I tested them out with a few light swings. The workshop wasn't spacious, but it was certainly roomier than the environment in the forest, which was crowded with foliage. If the spears were too unwieldy in here, they would be useless among the trees.

After trying a couple of moves, I checked the condition of the knives. They were still secure in the hafts.

We'll have to make do with these for tomorrow. In the worst-case scenario, if the spear got stuck somewhere and the knife became dislodged, we would just have to leave the spear.

It was a simple countermeasure, but I'd done all I could do for now. All that was left was to raise my fighting spirit and brace myself for tomorrow's hunt.

For dinner, I served less alcohol than normal but made up for it with extra meat. I grilled the meat with a little bit of salt and pepper, and Jolanda took a shine to the taste, bringing bite after bite to her mouth. She was too focused on eating to say anything.

No one brought up the topic of the black bear during dinner. We'd already decided on our course of action, and we all knew that there was no use discussing it any further. Instead (once she'd become less focused on the food), Jolanda told us all kinds of stories from Samya's childhood. I felt bad for Samya, but I listened to them just the same.

“One time, she got stuck in a trap I made,” Jolanda recounted with a snicker. “Oooh, she was *furious!*”

“You put it there on purpose!” Samya squawked indignantly. “You *knew* I used that path all the time! I blame you for that one!”

“But I marked it clearly. You’re the one who fell for it anyway,” argued Jolanda.

“*Clearly?* Piss off! Your mark was tiny and green and it blended right into the background!”

“Well, you still should’ve noticed,” Jolanda said without a hint of remorse.

Do I sense a hidden mischievous side?

I’d thought that all beastfolk were rowdy, but apparently, that wasn’t the case. The ones who grew up in the Black Forest were more spirited, and Samya in particular was more of a tomboy than other beastfolk.

Samya stopped Jolanda from recounting any of the stories in detail, but we got the general gist. Diana nodded nostalgically at many of them, probably recalling similar episodes from her own childhood.

After a lively meal with the family, I headed to bed early. The gang of women stuck around to chat for a while. I didn’t know what they talked about, but surely it was something *graceful* and *cultured*.

###

The next day, we got up and ran through our morning chores. Suffice to say, after our discussion from last night, I kept alert on my way to the lake for water. There was no reason to believe that the black bear wasn’t already roaming around this area.

After breakfast, we said our prayers at the *kamidana* in the workshop. Normally, we prayed for the work and hunting to go smoothly, but today, we prayed that we would be able to kill the black bear without anyone getting injured. Jolanda wanted to try too, so we all lined up side by side and performed the ritual.

I brought my palms together.

May we come home tonight, no matter how late. May we come home all together.

“I guess it’s time to set off,” I said and received unanimous affirmative responses.

It was time for the hunt to begin.

Samya and Jolanda, who were the most familiar with the forest, took the lead as scouts, and Lidy came in right behind them. Once our scouts found the bear, the three of them would convene and unleash a volley of arrows as our opening attack.

Rike and I followed after the two of them; Lidy and Diana brought up the rear. Once the bear came within melee range, it would be our (or my) turn to strike.

We brought Krul with us as well—in the event that someone was injured, Krul could help carry them home. It was risky for us to bring her along, but it was better than leaving her alone at the cabin where she could be attacked while we were wandering around unaware.

For her part, Krul was delighted to be able to go out adventuring with everyone two days in a row.

Our first stop was the clearing where we’d met Jolanda. It didn’t take long to get there. Unlike yesterday, when we’d been meandering aimlessly and stopping to harvest herbs along the way, we walked straight there.

When we arrived, I said, “This is where our search begins.”

Samya and Jolanda nodded and darted off together into the forest. The rest of us waited in the clearing.

Ideally, those two would lead the bear to us...but if not, we would have to go to the bear.

Hardly any time passed before Samya and Jolanda came back together.

“That was fast,” I said.

“It was,” Diana chimed in. With the spear in her hand (simple as it was), she

looked like quite the warrior.

Did they find the bear already? Or did they not find any signs of it in this area? Even if that were the case, it's too soon to assume that the beast is gone for good.

"Well? How did it go?" I pressed.

"We found it," Samya replied bluntly. Her normal exuberant self was nowhere to be seen, which was how I could tell she was intensely focused on the hunt.

Jolanda nodded without saying a word.

"I see. Did you come back because it'd be too difficult to lure the bear here?"

Both Samya and Jolanda shook their heads.

"No." Jolanda spoke quietly, almost in a whisper. "It's not far from here. Why don't we set a trap for it?" she suggested.

"It's sleeping like a log right now. Let's kill it quickly," Samya said brusquely, spitting out her words.

So they'd stumbled on the thing while it was asleep...but if they'd had the ability to kill it on the spot, they would've. They must have judged that laying a trap for it in this clearing was the safer option and also more likely to succeed.

The choice didn't call into question Samya and Jolanda's abilities, not at all—it was simply a matter of choosing the safest bet. The rest of us weren't able to navigate through the foliage as soundlessly as the beastfolk, so here in the clearing, we could all pitch in.

"Got it," I replied. "We'll do as you suggest."

Everyone else nodded as well.

Jolanda loped off to cut some tree branches. In the meantime, the rest of us dug holes around the clearing. When she returned, Jolanda would turn them into trapping pits.

Samya and the others usually relied on archery to bring down their prey, but Jolanda was a trapper—she incapacitated her prey before finishing it off.

Jolanda came back with the branches and cut them to the appropriate size. She sharpened one end of each branch with a knife and then installed them above the holes with the spikes facing down. That way, once the bear fell into the hole, the wooden spikes would fall, preventing it from escaping.

Of course, the bear wouldn't be so stupid as to fall into an open pit. So, we camouflaged the holes by covering them with thin branches and then spreading a layer of brush on top.

"Don't think we forgot about you, Krul," I said.

"*Kulululu!*" she chirped happily.

I gave her a rope to hold in her mouth. That rope wound up and over a thick branch and then came down to the ground on the other side. The end not held by Krul was fastened in a wide loop.

This was another one of Jolanda's clever contraptions. She'd taken one look at Krul and had asked, "Is this one strong?"

"Of course! You can count on her!" Diana had boasted so loudly that I'd been worried she was going to wake the sleeping bear.

So, Jolanda had come up with the snare trap as an extra measure—when Krul gave a strong tug on the rope, the loop would tighten around whatever was trapped inside.

The bear was strong, but more than that, it was *heavy*. While it would take three or four people working together to trip up the bear, Krul was capable of slowing the bear down herself...though hauling it into the air might be a tough ask. But with the seconds Krul could buy us, the rest of our party could ambush the bear.

With those measures in place, our preparations were complete. Now, we just had to lure it over.

Samya and Jolanda dashed off a second time, disappearing among the trees.

Before long, Jolanda came hurtling out of the treeline, hollering at the top of her lungs.

“It’s coming!”

We popped out of the shrubs that we’d been hiding behind, but when Jolanda sprang toward us, we ducked back down with her. We all swallowed our tension, trying to lay low and wait.

Off in the distance, we heard the rustling of leaves coming closer and closer. In no time, Samya flew into the clearing like she’d been shoved from behind. She ran toward us, nimbly dodging all the pits. Hot on her tail was a towering black giant, trampling the undergrowth beneath its feet.

The bear.

An arrow—Samya’s, maybe—was buried deep in one of its shoulders. That was most likely how they’d provoked the bear to follow them.

It charged, and its path took it right toward one of the traps, exactly like Jolanda had planned.

Jolanda and I both clenched our fists, tasting the hot satisfaction that was sure to come when the bear’s paw went crashing into the pit.

However, we’d started celebrating too early... The bear’s animal instincts seemed to warn it that something was wrong with the ground. It twisted its foot to avoid the pit, though it was a narrow miss.

For a moment, I was truly awed. Having been shot at, it must’ve been nearly blind with anger, but it was still smart enough to avoid a hidden lethal threat.

I heard someone click their tongue in irritation nearby. It sounded like it might’ve been Jolanda, but I couldn’t be sure. Or...I didn’t want to be sure.

While the bear was still trying to regain its footing, an arrow whizzed past me, heading straight for it. The tip punctured the beast’s shoulder, though I wasn’t sure whether that was the intended target or not.

Roaring in pain, the bear turned to seek out its aggressor—Samya. It lunged forward again.

“Now!” Jolanda yelled.

“*Kululululu!*” Krul chirruped around a mouthful of rope, and she ran, pulling hard on the snare.

The wide noose on the ground closed around the bear's back paws.

Feeling the tug, the bear bellowed again, trying to step out of its bonds, but Krul was faster; the rope quickly tightened around its paws. Krul wasn't strong enough to hoist it into the air, but she had stopped its movements.

Diana and I made sure it was immobilized before we leaped out of the bushes. I charged toward the bear as fast as I could, as if I were trying to outrun Diana. I thrust my spear forward, into the space where I guessed the bear's heart was located. The bear's attention was still on its bound rear legs, so it reacted a fraction of a second too late.

The spear tip carved into the bear's torso with no resistance. Once I'd buried the spear deep into the bear's body, I let go and darted backward, putting some distance between us while I unsheathed my shortsword.

The bear took a wild swing at me with its forepaw, but it missed. Seizing the opportunity, Diana plunged her spear into the bear before it could wind up for another blow.

I didn't even have time to use my sword—Diana had delivered the finishing blow. The bear didn't so much as twitch.

"We did it," I panted. "It's over."

Those words would've been called a "flag" in my previous world. Yet, even though I'd come to a fantastical new world, this was still reality and not fiction.

The bear did not make a miraculous recovery. It lay on the ground, dead.

"Cheers!" I yelled.

"Cheers!!!" repeated a chorus of five different voices.

Back in the yard at home, we celebrated together as a family with Jolanda as our guest. And what was the reason for all the merriment? Why, our successful hunt of the black bear, of course.

Before us, piled high on plates, were stacks of grilled meat, butchered from the bear we'd just killed. We'd dressed the bear's body on the spot, bundled the parts together, and then, with Krul's help, carried them all back home. We'd

left the rest of the corpse where it was—I'd been told that the wolves would take care of what remained.

Yesterday, I'd prepared myself for a tough battle, but surprisingly, everything had gone smoothly.

No, wait...

It was precisely *because* of those thorough preparations that we'd been able to complete our mission without any problems.

The best news of all was that none of us had been injured. There was no bigger blessing than the fact that we'd all come home safe and sound. The sight of everyone's smiling faces lined up around the table was even better than the mountain of fresh meat we'd earned as a reward.

"In the middle of the fight, I heard someone '*tsk*' super loudly. Now...who could it've been?" Samya mused out loud. She was smirking, so no doubt she already knew who the culprit was. This must've been payback for all the childhood stories that had been leaked.

Jolanda, who was sitting next to Samya, slapped her on the shoulder. Everyone else laughed.

To redirect the conversation, Jolanda said, "Come to think of it, I've yet to thank you all."

On our way home, we'd stopped by Jolanda's den to check what state it was in. Fortunately, it was largely undamaged, so she would be leaving our cabin tomorrow.

"You don't have to thank us," I said. "You're Samya's childhood friend."

"No, I must," Jolanda insisted, showing no signs of backing down.

But there was nothing we could want from her.

Jolanda thought for a minute. Then, she smacked one palm with her fist. "Aha, I got it." When she noticed that we were all staring at her, she shrunk into herself. "It's nothing much, but I really want to express my gratitude."

"Really," I remarked, "don't worry about it."

Jolanda glanced at me anxiously. “Recently, there’ve been rumors of magical knives being sold in the city. I was going to go check it out for myself one of these days, though I probably can’t afford one.”

“Intriguing. What do you mean by magic?” I asked. “Can they produce flames, or do they have any other elemental effect?”

“I-I don’t know the details, but I was thinking...could this information count as payment? Is it enough?”

“It’s plenty,” I said with a smile.

Magical knives, huh? Even if they couldn’t produce fire, they must have some other kind of effect. I want to know what they do...plus, I want to see if I can forge one myself.

And so, night descended, along with the curtains on the second installment of our bear fighting saga.

Chapter 2: Treasure Hunt in the City

A few days after our battle with the black bear, it was time to make our delivery to Camilo.

In the morning, we piled all the inventory into our cart and hitched up Krul. The last time she got to pull the cart was a few weeks ago, so she was visibly excited. She wasn't making a ruckus or anything, but as we finished up our preparations, she frolicked happily around the yard.

Diana calmed Krul down, and the rest of us finished securing the cargo. Rike climbed into the driver's seat and took the reins in hand. Krul cooed and walked forward.

We proceeded through the forest at a good pace, and the clunking of the cart echoed through the trees. The only other sounds that broke through the silence were the shrill cries of birds and the occasional wolf howl from far away. All the noise we made must've deterred animals from approaching, so we arrived at the forest border without running into anything.

Once we reached the road, we picked up our pace. After all, the robber that had been ambushing travelers was a threat no more—that person had turned out to be a demon woman named Nilda who'd been looking to commission a sword from our forge. After I'd finished her sword, I'd had her promise that she would go back to the demon kingdom. Nevertheless, we couldn't afford to be negligent in our security. Other bandits were known to roam this road.

Mid-range weapons had come in handy during our fight against the bear a few days ago, and they could be useful on the road too. *Maybe I should consider adding some to Forge Eizo's weapon lineup...*

In the end, nothing out of the ordinary happened, and we arrived at the city unharmed. Without getting off the cart, we greeted the guard on duty and rode through the gates. In the city streets, the sight of our drake-drawn cart had yet to lose its novelty, and people stared openly as we passed.

But, in truth, Krul was only drawing about ten percent of that attention. Another twenty percent of the stares were directed at the suspension system. And the remaining seventy percent—the overwhelming majority—went to Lidy.

Animal, machine, and person—each were rare in their own way, so it couldn't be helped that our group attracted attention. Because we'd come here with her several times in the past, fewer people were looking at Krul. I suppose that continued exposure led to a gradual weakening of interest.

Elves, however, were a highly unusual sight. Travelers and townsmen alike were unabashedly gawking at Lidy. With time, the people who lived here were sure to grow used to seeing both Lidy and Krul; we ventured into the city every two weeks, so the novelty would eventually fade.

And so, we continued leisurely on through the city until we arrived at Camilo's. We parked the cart by the storehouse, unhitched Krul, and led her around to the back of the store. As usual, we requested that a clerk bring fodder and water for Krul, and then headed up to the conference room. We were already old hands here.

Once we'd settled, we chatted idly while waiting for Camilo. He came in before too long with the head clerk.

"Hey," I said.

"Yo," Camilo replied.

That was the end of our short greetings. We dove straight into the main topic.

"Did you bring your usual inventory?" Camilo asked.

"Yeah, same lineup, same quantities."

"Got it."

Camilo didn't seem to have anything else to discuss business-wise—he immediately signaled to the clerk, who nodded and exited the room.

Suddenly, I remembered something. "That's right... I have a question for you."

"Oh? What is it?"

"I heard a rumor that there was a magic knife making rounds in the city," I

explained. "Do you know anything about it?"

Camilo furrowed his brows. "Magic? Not a clue."

"I'm not entirely sure how reliable my source is," I admitted.

Camilo folded his arms and tilted his head quizzically. "Hmmm... If something that interesting had shown up around town, I would've heard about it. But I'm afraid I don't know anything."

"I see."

"You want one for yourself?" he asked.

"Well, I wouldn't *refuse* it," I said. "Mostly, I just want to get my hands on one and see if I can learn anything."

"Got it." With his arms still crossed, Camilo stroked his beard. "In that case, I'll send out some feelers."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Don't mention it. Piece of cake." Camilo flexed his biceps.

Of course, we were still going to search for ourselves, but it was still encouraging to have the eyes and ears of a pro helping us in our quest.

I changed the subject. "How's the development of the suspension system going?"

"As smooth as it could be," he replied. "We don't need to rely on your expertise just yet. The prototype should be completed soon."

"Good, good. We'll be here every two weeks, but if you need anything in the meantime, don't hesitate to ask."

"Okay. Thanks."

"No problem."

We left the conference room, returned to where Krul was waiting, and I tipped the apprentice who was looking after her. Then, we hitched Krul back to the cart and set off for home. We took it slow on the city streets. The same guard we'd seen that morning was still working, so we bid him farewell.

Before Krul had joined our family, our visits to the city had sometimes been long enough to see a rotation of the guard. These days though, with Krul helping out, we arrived at the city earlier and left earlier too. This was only our third trip together, but all three times, we'd departed before the guards could switch out.

Krul was the MVP—no doubt. We never failed to return to the cabin with plenty of time left in the day.

While we'd been at Camilo's, the weather had taken a turn for the worse. The pastoral landscape was a familiar sight, but the sky above us was heavy and gray. Trying to beat the rain, we flew down the road back to the forest.

"This is where we first met Nilda," I remarked along the way.

"That's right," Rike responded.

Staring out at our surroundings, Samya said, "I hope nothing out of the ordinary happens today."

"We can't let down our guard," added Diana as she kept a steady watch.

I was surveying the road carefully too and checked to make sure there were no suspicious movements or presences. Lidy was on the lookout for magical attacks and phenomena instead of anything physical.

In this world, magic users were extremely rare. To wield magic, a person not only had to possess magical ability but be trained in its fundamentals too. However, there was no guarantee that we wouldn't run into bandits who could use magic. After all, we had an example of a magic-using blacksmith right here.

In any case, nothing unusual happened on the road. The guards were likely still keeping a tight patrol following the robber incident. Wasn't it ironic that the appearance of a robber could actually lead to increased public safety?

We entered the forest, keeping our guards up, but the cart was so noisy that the only animals who approached us were clearly harmless. We could usually relax somewhat once we were beyond the tree line, but today we stayed vigilant in case more bears were roaming the area.

Krul and Samya's sharp senses were our first line of defense. Diana and I kept

a close eye on our surroundings, and Lidy backed us up from a magical standpoint. All of this comprised an airtight defense system which we maintained all the way through the forest.

I spotted the occasional tanuki look-alike, which was the only noteworthy thing on the trip back home.

A while had passed since I'd first begun my life in this world. Every time we made this journey, I couldn't help but feel that we were being overly cautious, but that was just my past self talking. Before, I'd lived in a relatively peaceful and safe country, and my instincts from back then were still active. I *had* lived more than forty years on Earth, so a few months in this world weren't enough to override the common sense I'd accumulated. But, as more time passed, I hoped I would gradually change and adapt to my second life.

Back at the cabin, we went to stow everything away, and I noticed that our storage space was filling up. We would need to build a proper storehouse soon.

Krul was in a good mood from a day of cart duty. Even after we removed her harness, she still had the energy to run circles around the clearing. Watching her, I basked in the warm glow of the domestic scene, then finished carrying the supplies into the house.

That night, I announced to everyone that Rike and I would be going back to the city the next day to search for the magical knife.

###

I shouldered my knapsack and called out to Rike. "It's time to go."

"Okay!" she replied.



Like me, Rike had a backpack on, but both our bags were fairly light since we weren't going to make a delivery or purchase supplies. No, the sole purpose of our trip was to track down the knife that Jolanda had mentioned. Camilo hadn't heard anything about it though, which meant that it likely wasn't being sold in any of the major shops.

So, we had no choice but to investigate on our own. We could've started yesterday while we were still in the city, but I chose to dedicate a whole day to the hunt instead. Of course, there was still a chance that we wouldn't find it by the end of the day.

We could search the city every time we traveled to make a delivery...but that seemed rather like a waste of time. It was better to search all day today, and if we couldn't locate it, we would give up for good.

Rike and I were the main smiths of the forge, so with the two of us gone, it meant that the rest of the family was taking a day off from blacksmithing. I told them they could spend the time however they wanted.

In this case, the "rest of the family" referred to Samya, Diana, Lidy, and Krul. With that combination of skills and personalities, I had no doubt they'd be spending the day in the forest...especially since we'd neutralized the threat of the black bear.

"We'll be back!" Rike and I called out as we left, waving to the others.

"Come home safe!" they chorused, and Krul chimed in with a "*kululu*."

And so, we set off down the road, just the two of us. Usually, the whole household came along when we traveled this way. Neither Rike nor I had the superior sense of smell that Samya did, but through our repeated trips into the city, our instincts for detecting danger must've become honed—we could more or less sense which areas to avoid.

"Come to think of it, this might be the first time we've traveled together, just the two of us," I said.

"I think you're right," Rike replied. "By the time I met you, Samya was already living at the cabin."

“Yeah.”

If I hadn't stumbled across Samya, Rike might've been my first friend in this world.

Well, perhaps not. Without Samya, I wouldn't have known how to get to the city, so it would've taken me longer to start selling knives in the Open Market. By then, Rike would've already moved on from the city without ever having spotted my wares.

In that sense, meeting everyone in the order I had...must've been fate.

“Sorry to make you accompany a fossil like me,” I joked. “But do me a favor and try to keep your spirits up, okay?”

“Why would you say that?!” Rike exclaimed.

I heard the flapping of a bird's wings from a nearby tree—it darted out of the boughs, startled by Rike's loud voice. Maybe it was because of her dwarven genes or her upbringing in the noisy environment of the forge, but she could be quite loud when she put her mind to it.

“I could never be bored when traveling with you, Boss!” she said emphatically.

I smiled dryly, relenting. “All right, all right. I get it.”

We didn't encounter any wild animals in the forest—Rike's yelling had probably scared away even the wolves.

A light breeze accompanied us on the road into the city, making the journey pleasant. The wind rustled through the plains as it whisked through the billowing grasses.

“It's been a while since we've come through here on foot,” I remarked.

“That's right,” said Rike. “We didn't used to have the cart.”

“Mmhmm.”

In the time since we'd first started doing business with Camilo, we had steadily increased our inventory. Along the way, Krul had joined our family, and I had installed a suspension system on our cart. But today was like old times—

we were once again traveling on our own two feet, seeing the world at eye level.

“This is nice too, once in a while,” I mused, savoring the caress of the wind against my cheeks. Considering that living a quiet life was my goal, I wanted to spend more leisurely days like this.

“Next time, we should take Krul on a walk with us,” Rike suggested.

“We should.” Krul was perfectly happy around people, and the more we took her into town, the more she and the townspeople would grow used to each other.

I should really plan some trips out here for pleasure, not just business.

We kept an eye out as we strolled along the road. The combo of a man and a dwarf probably wasn't an enticing target for bandits, but we were certainly a rare enough pair that we stood out.

I didn't want any trouble—I only wanted to get into the city as soon as possible.

Thanks perhaps to the diligence of the guards that patrolled the roads, we arrived safely at the city gates. The guard on duty was one we'd seen several times before.

“Morning,” I said in greeting.

“Hello. Just the two of you today?” the guard asked.

“Yes. We're here on different business than usual.”

“I see.” His eyes sharpened, his gaze shifting into that of a professional tasked with protecting the road and city streets. He gave us a once-over before his expression softened, and he was once again the guard we were familiar with. “I'm sure you don't need to be told, but take care of yourselves in there.”

I bowed my head. “We will. Thank you.”

We passed by him and entered through the gates. He had already shifted his focus away from us to the next group entering the city.

Normally, we headed straight from the gate to Camilo's store. This city was a waypoint on the route to the capital; accordingly, its streets were filled with people from all different races, genders, and ages, though it wasn't a match for the diversity of the capital.

It was a truth of the world—every world—that where people gathered, money flowed. The city was home to the Open Market (where I first started selling my goods), tons of street stalls, and establishments like Camilo's with permanent storefronts.

Long, long ago, the inner walls of the city used to be the outer walls. In the present day, nobility, landowners, and farmers with their own property lived inside the inner city. We were currently outside the walls in the new market district, which operated on a different set of rules.

In the past, the new market district wasn't recognized as an official part of the city—back then, the inner walls demarcated where the city started and ended, but people moved outside the walls of their own accord. It hadn't been illegal to do so per se, and that was how the new market had been established. So, because of the district's unconventional past, it played by a set of flexible rules and unusual customs.

I figured that any new product—anything that had come onto the market recently—was most likely sold in the new market district rather than beyond the inner city walls. Rike and I followed this hunch and started by wandering around the district.

Since Camilo had said he hadn't heard any rumors, we started on the side of the neighborhood farthest from his store. Rike and I chatted casually as we walked.

I pointed out a stall. "Look, this one sells bread."

"Boss, this one is a baggage store. Good for travel."

We also came across shops that sold meat, cloth, and other goods. I'd heard that, in the inner city, stores were only allowed to sell one type of product, so the variety on display here was a trait unique to the new market district.

Our main targets were tinkerers and stores that sold trinkets. Eventually, we

stopped to talk to one shopkeeper.

“Excuse me, can you show me the knives you have for sale?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh, sure, here you are.” The merchant brought out an assortment of his stock.

“Thank you.”

I glanced over the array, but none of them were magical...or remarkable in quality (my apologies to the blacksmiths). However, they were good enough for everyday tasks and reasonably priced to boot. Still, they weren’t what we were seeking, so we thanked the owner and left the shop.

We tried a few more stores but didn’t find anything that stood out.

After our umpteenth failure, I conceded to Rike, “No luck.”

“Yeah.”

A few hours had passed since we’d gotten to the city, and the sun was at its zenith. We’d been wandering around without any food or drink, and my stomach growled a complaint. The last sustenance we’d had was breakfast back at the cabin.

“Shall we eat?” I suggested. “And I don’t mean at a stall or somewhere we’ve gone before—let’s go for broke and try something new.”

“Fine by me.”

“I wonder what kind of place would be good.”

We ambled around, looking for a spot to eat, and happened upon a cozy shop in a narrow alley. There was a sign hanging from the eaves that depicted a waterfowl drinking from a vase. Underneath the drawing, the sign read “The Drinking Goose.”

The restaurant didn’t look very large, and no noise from inside could be heard outside. It reminded me of the canteen I used to frequent in my previous world. *I wonder if the old lady who owns that place is still healthy.*

“This spot looks perfect,” I remarked.

“Should we go in?” Rike asked with a tiny tilt of her head.

I gave an exaggerated nod. “Yes, let’s.”

The door of the establishment was standing open, and the two of us stepped inside.

Although the shop was in the new market district, its interior was tidy and clean. At least I could say—though I don’t mean to be rude—that it was nicer than the inn Rike had been staying in when we’d first met.

There were hardly any customers... I guess that’s why it had seemed so quiet from the outside—no business, no typical restaurant hustle and bustle. It wasn’t late enough in the day for the lunchtime crowd to have gone home, so the dearth of customers was slightly worrisome.

Did I pick wrong? No one’s noticed that we’re here... It’s not too late to turn tail and leave.

But right at that moment, we heard a cheerful voice call out from the back of the shop, “I’ll be with you right away!”

A young woman soon rushed out to the front. She had her green hair pulled back into braids and was wearing comfortable clothes underneath an apron. The smattering of freckles across her face suited her vibrant personality in an unquantifiable way.

“Take a seat!” she said brightly, gesturing at a table.

“Uh, yeah, all right.”

Rike and I had completely missed our window of escape, so we obediently sat down where the woman directed.

“At this time of day, I can only serve the dishes I’ve already prepared,” she explained. “Is that fine?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “That would actually be preferable.”

“Great! Sit tight!” With those final words, she dashed back into the kitchen, still maintaining the same level of vigor.

I thought she was a waitress, but could it be that she’s actually the owner?

I turned to Rike and whispered, “All we can do now is prepare ourselves

mentally for whatever comes next.”

“We’re in this together, Boss.”

If this ends up being a disaster, at least we’ll have a grand tale to bring home. That would be better than being served mediocre food and not even having a story to show for the experience.

Rike and I were discussing where else in the district we should look for the knife when the woman came out with our food.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

She set down bowls of root vegetable soup, plates of grilled herb-crusted chicken (or this world’s equivalent), and flatbread. Everything at least *looked* appetizing.

I brought my palms together in a prayer as usual. “*Itadakimasu.*”

The woman looked taken aback but only for a moment. She quickly smiled and said, “Take your time.”

“Where do I start,” I mumbled, casting an eye over the spread.

I speared some chicken with a fork and took a bite. The juices of succulent meat burst on my tongue, followed by the hint of herb flavor.

“The grilled meat is delicious.”

“So is the soup,” Rike said. Apparently, she’d started with that first.

I tried a sip of the soup. To call it consommé would be doing it a slight disservice—there was an umami flavor to the broth lent to it by the root vegetables and (I’m guessing) meat bones. The gentle flavor permeated my body.

“You’re right. It’s tasty.”

“We hit the jackpot,” Rike proclaimed.

“That we did.”

To be honest, our low expectations and empty stomachs had likely added a star to our rating of the meal, but even without the extra leg up, the food was delicious.

If the shop had been one or two streets closer to the main thoroughfare, it would've been more popular. I wondered if the owner had chosen this location on purpose or if there'd been other factors in play.

Regardless, Rike and I were too busy savoring our meals to speak, so we finished eating in silence.

We soon polished off our plates, and by the time we were done, the shop had completely emptied except for the two of us. We hung around our table a while longer to talk strategy regarding the knife hunt. Hopefully, the owner wouldn't mind as long as we weren't taking up a table that could've gone to a waiting customer.

"We've already searched this area thoroughly," Rike pointed out.

"Yeaah. Maybe we're not looking in the right places."

"That could be it. The smith could be working with a specific retailer."

She was right—Forge Eizo sold all our products through Camilo, so the person we were looking for could be doing business the same way. If that were true, then they would likely be in a long-term partnership with one store, rather than selling items short term in the Open Market.

We narrowed down options, coming up with two types of promising candidates: shops that had started selling knives fairly recently and ones that would accept magical items without hesitation.

These new ideas reinvigorated my purpose and drove me to keep searching. "Why not? Let's try a few more shops."

Having determination was certainly a good trait. That said, running around visiting every shop would be nothing more than a waste of time. If possible, I wanted to narrow down the possible candidates even more before we set out.

The restaurant's (assumed) owner came out from the back, having finished her work. She approached us and asked, "Are you finished eating?"

Aaah, there's one tactic we haven't tried yet...

"Yeah," I told her. "By the way, would you happen to know if any stores around here carry magical knives?"

Now that was asking point-blank.

As a store owner with a shop downtown, she might've heard something. She, unfortunately, didn't seem to get a lot of traffic, but restaurants were still prime gathering spots.

Besides, there was no harm in asking. We already had zero information, so even if she didn't know anything, we could hardly be worse off. And there was always the chance she'd say something that would nudge us in the right direction.

"Magical knives, you say? Let me think..." She crossed her arms and went quiet.

Chances seem slim.

I was just about to give up hope when she clapped her hands together. "I remember now! Johnny from three buildings down came here bragging that he got his hands on an amazing knife recently. He asked me if I wanted one too."

Rike and I instantly leaped up and wrapped the owner's hands in ours. "That's it!" we shouted in unison.

Just as quickly, we came to our senses and let go of her.

"I-I apologize," I stammered.

"It's fine." Her beatific smile reminded me of the Virgin Mary.

Focus, focus. I can't let myself get distracted from our goal.

I took a few copper pieces from my pocket and handed them to the woman. "Thank you so much! Everything was delicious!"

She smiled once more. "Come back anytime."

"We will!" Rike and I exclaimed.

With that promise, we left The Drinking Goose.

Our next stop was Johnny, who lived three doors down. He turned out to be a tanner.

"We overlooked this possibility," I said.

Rike nodded.

No one looking to buy a knife would come to a tanner, but Johnny probably used the knives himself and sold them on the side.

As we stood in front of the building, I called out, "Hello? Is anyone home?"

Soon, a bearded man lumbered out to meet us.

This must be Johnny. Appearance-wise, he's a dead ringer for your quintessential craftsman, though I guess you could say the same about me.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"We heard from the owner of The Drinking Goose that you have an inventory of magical knives you're looking to sell."

Johnny looked suspicious for a moment, but then his face cleared. "Oh, you're talking about *those*. Hang on a moment." He went back inside and came out quickly with a cloth bundle that looked about the size of a knife.

That must be it.

"You're looking for this, no?" he asked.

"Yes. How much?"

He told me the price. It was surprisingly cheap for a magical knife, but I handed over the amount he specified without questioning it.

"Thank you very much."

"Be careful," he cautioned. "It cuts like it's made of magic."

"Like it's made of magic?" I echoed.

"Yeah, yeah," he confirmed. "That's what the seller told me when I bought it alongside a few normal knives. I gotta admit, it really cuts like a dream."

"So...it can't burst into flames?" I asked tentatively.

"Not that I know of."

"Oh. All right. Well, thanks."

Slightly disappointed, I slipped the knife into my bag. Rike and I soon put Johnny's workshop behind us.

So the magical knife isn't so magical after all... But if it was as sharp as Johnny claimed, that was interesting in and of itself. I decided to chalk it up as a win.

The two of us quickly found a hidden corner, and I took the knife out of my satchel. Wrapped up as it was, I couldn't see anything of the scabbard or hilt.

"Hurry it up, Boss," Rike urged, like a child with a new toy.

"Be patient," I said, trying to calm her down.

I slowly unwound the cloth, revealing the knife inch by inch. Rike and I stared at the naked blade, our eyes opened wide with astonishment. I turned the knife to look at the pommel.

Sure enough, carved there was the insignia of a chubby cat sitting on its haunches.

In other words, this was a bona fide Forge Eizo product—the real McCoy, forged by our very own hands.

Chapter 3: The Drinking Goose

Our mission fulfilled, it was time for Rike and me to head home. As we wound our way through the city streets, we tried desperately to hold back our laughter. We definitely looked suspicious, to the point that I was somewhat worried we'd get stopped at the gate. Fortunately, we were allowed to pass through.

Together, we strolled down the road, and finally, we couldn't take it any more—we burst out laughing at the same time.

“Ha ha ha ha!!!”

At least no one was around to see our giggling fit.

We'd spent the whole day on a wild goose chase looking for a knife that Forge Eizo had made! Who would've thought? If the knife we'd found today was considered magical, then we had tons of magic knives waiting back home.

“Our quest ended in vain, but this was a great break from our regular routine,” I said.

“That's true,” Rike replied. “Plus, we reconfirmed that our products are amazing.”

“Yup.”

The two of us were swept up by a hurricane of joy and we laughed all the way back home.

Back at the cabin, I gave a play-by-play of our day to the others.

“It turned out to be a fool's errand, but that restaurant owner helped us out a lot. Next time we make a delivery, I want to drop by and properly thank her.”

“Good idea.” Diana nodded firmly. She had a strong sense of propriety and would've suggested the same, had I not said it first.

Samya tilted her head quizzically. “What the heck was Jolanda talking about?”

“My guess is that the rumors passed around from person to person,” I reasoned, “and the nitty-gritty got lost in the grapevine.” Each retelling probably chipped away some of the details until only the bare minimum was left, and that was probably how the rumored “magical knife” had been born. It was just a classic game of telephone.

“I guess so,” Samya said.

“If you see Jolanda, let her know the knife is one of ours,” I requested.

“Kay.”

“You can give her one too.”

Samya gave a dismissive wave. “I know, I know.”

And so, the saga of the magical knife came to an end.

###

We spent the next two weeks refilling our inventory and, before we knew it, delivery day was upon us. As usual, we packed everything up, headed into town, and delivered the wares to Camilo at his store.

Krul had grown attached to the apprentice who always took care of her. When we came down from the conference room, we found the two of them racing...or playing tag...? It was hard to tell. For the sake of their budding friendship, I wanted to keep making these regular trips into town.

When it came time to go home, I diverted from our normal route out of the city.

I had Krul pull up at a junction in the main street—the closest one to The Drinking Goose—and I climbed out of the cart. I made sure the coins I’d placed in my pocket earlier were still there. They were a token of my appreciation.

“I have something I want to do,” I said to the others. “Can you wait here?”

Winding through several side streets, I finally spotted the shop sign I’d been looking for. I had arrived earlier than the lunch rush, but the door was already standing ajar.

I entered The Drinking Goose, calling out, “Excuse me!”

“Yes! Coming!” A few seconds passed and the owner peeked her head out from the back. “Hey, it’s you! From the other day!” She walked out front to greet me.

“Hello again.” I bowed my head. “You really helped us out, so I came to say thank you.”

“What an honest man!” she exclaimed. “You shouldn’t have.”

“No, no. Please, it’s my pleasure.” I fumbled through my pockets.

But then, the woman held up her hand in front of me. “Wait a minute. Don’t tell me you’re going to give me money...?”

“Yes. Is something wrong?” I asked.

“I can’t accept it!” she protested. “All I did was answer your question.”

Darn... Looks like my plan’s no good. Judging by her personality, it seems that her heels are really dug in on this one.

But, in times like these, there was a tried and true strategy favored by geezers like me: “I beg you to consider it from my perspective. I simply refuse to go home without thanking you properly.” I politely but stubbornly made it clear that I wasn’t moving before I returned her favor.

In the end, my tactic was successful. She sighed heavily and relented. “If you insist...but I won’t be accepting coin. In exchange for the tip about the knife, I’d like some information on where I can find some unusual meats.”

“Unusual meats?” I repeated, just to confirm.

Piece of cake! This is an area where I’m an expert.

“And...” she continued.

Oh, there’s more. Good. I came here to show my appreciation, so I won’t accept any easy requests that are only meant to distract me.

“Yes?”

“Can you stop with that stiff way of speaking?”

I see. Best not to fight her on that one. “All right. I’ll try.”

“Good,” she said with an easy grin.

“Back to the meat then. If you’re after rare kinds of meats, I’ve got plenty at home.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I live in the Black Forest.”

“Huh?”

Yup, that’s the normal reaction.

“My home and workshop are in the Black Forest, Miss...”

That’s right, I still don’t know her name...

“Athena. No need to add ‘miss.’”

“Got it. I’m Eizo. You see, Athena, I live in the Black Forest... Not alone though, but with the dwarf who was with me the other day. One of the beastfolk lives with me too and a couple of others.”

“Oh, I remember the dwarven woman,” noted Athena. “Wait, no, that’s not what’s important here! So...the Black Forest, huh?”

“Yup.”

“You’re lying, right? Come on. We’re talking about the *Black Forest*.”

“I swear.”

“Hmmmm.” Athena crossed her arms. At first, she seemed unwilling to accept what I’d told her, but after a pause, she said, “Well, whatever. I’ll believe you. There’s no reason for you to lie.”

“Thanks,” I said, smiling wryly.

After that, Athena launched straight back into a discussion about meat.

This woman switches gears fast!

“Right then. Meat from the Black Forest,” she mused, taking a moment to think.

“It’s not poisonous or anything,” I promised. “I eat it myself.”

Athena took her time to think it through, mentally calculating something that only she was privy to. Finally, she said, “All right. Can you bring me some?”

“Of course. I can be back as early as tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. We’d be making the same trip two days in a row, but I decided not to worry about it.

“Then I’ll take you up on your offer. Can you come in the morning?”

“I’ll come alone,” I said, “so that’s no problem.”

“Thanks.”

“Happy to do it,” I replied.

Athena and I then shook hands, sealing the deal.

“Want anything to eat?” she asked.

“My family’s waiting for me today, but another time,” I promised.

“That’s too bad. Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“See you then.” I waved to Athena and left The Drinking Goose.

Gotta hurry back to the others.

I rushed back to the cart and climbed in. “Sorry for the wait.”

“You were gone for a while,” Rike stated. Her voice was quiet, but it was laced with steel.

“Um...you see...” I floundered, intimidated by the pressure she was exerting.

I recounted what’d happened at The Drinking Goose. After all, there was no reason to hide anything.

Everyone agreed to the bargain I’d struck. Earning their approval was easier than I expected, so needless to say, I was relieved.

###

When I showed up at the city gates alone the next morning, the guard on duty

eyed me suspiciously but let me through anyway. I made my way directly to The Drinking Goose.

“Morning!” I called out as I opened the door.

I heard the sound of quick footsteps, and then the owner—Athena—popped out from the back. When she saw it was me, her smile was as bright as sunshine. “Welcome! Come in, come in!”



She was energetic as usual, and I found myself being drawn into her pace just by being here. The last two times, the eatery had been quiet, but today, it was dead silent...and I mean *dead* silent.

Granted, I *was* here before opening, so I shouldn't have expected anything else.

Athena guided me to a table and served me a cup of herbal tea from the back. Steam was gently rising from the surface.

"You came by a little after opening last time. This must be a new kind of quiet for you, huh?" Athena commented with a chuckle.

"Pretty much," I replied. "If you ask me, having so many empty chairs feels like a waste of your good cooking."

She smiled. "Thanks."

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Athena's skills were on par with Sandro, who ran a restaurant in the capital (or so I'd heard). Sandro's shop was apparently really popular. The Drinking Goose ought to have more customers, and adding a few unique menu items to entice new patrons was a great idea. She was likely thinking that when she requested rare types of meat from me. Once the diners take the first bite, they'll be hooked for sure.

I removed some bundles from my bag. "Here, will this do?"

"This is...boar and deer meat from the Black Forest?" Athena asked.

I nodded. We had enough of both at home, so we could spare some to sell. Not many people in the city—or in this world—could say the same.

From what Samya had told me, beastfolk hunted in the forest, but as a rule, they only caught enough prey to feed their own families; they wouldn't kill extra to sell in the Open Market. And since the Open Market was teeming with people, there was no way Jolanda would ever want to set foot there.

"These cuts are beautiful," Athena remarked.

"Thanks."

I knew that the meat was of high quality. I'd helped butcher animals several

times before, and I cooked with the meat regularly. Perhaps the superior quality was because it was sourced from animals that had grown up in the wild.

“Would it be possible for you to make regular deliveries?” she asked.

“Of course,” I agreed easily. “But I won’t be able to come every day or say, deliver thirty portions on short notice.” We had no shortage of meat. In fact, our supplies only ever increased. Samya and the others went out to hunt once a week, and they always brought back more than we could eat.

Athena folded her arms and tilted her head in thought. “Hmmm, my customer base won’t increase just by adding these to the menu though.”

“Not as they are,” I agreed. “People won’t be easily convinced that the meat is from the Black Forest either. Is there some other way to lure people in?”

Athena pursed her lips. “You’re right...and I’m not sure.”

She would know better than me how vital it was to come up with new recipes for the menu. Cooking for family and for customers were two entirely different ball games—creating a dish you could serve to clientele wasn’t something you could do at a moment’s notice.

“A new dish that anyone can eat...” Athena mused out loud, nodding to herself.

I gave the problem some thought too, but in reality, I only knew about recipes from my previous world. I didn’t know the measurements of everything in detail, but I had a general grasp of the ingredients, proportions, and steps. After all, cuisine was an important part of culture.

To that effect, I worried that I would pollute the local cuisine of this world by introducing my personal recipes to Athena—serving Japanese food in an eatery was different from cooking it up in a secluded cabin in the middle of the Black Forest.

But maybe I was overthinking things again. If I looked at it from another perspective, someone was bound to figure out the fundamental theories and techniques of this style of cooking sooner or later. There shouldn’t be a problem with teaching Athena how to make, say, a hamburger, right? A burger was just minced meat shaped into a patty and grilled. It was hardly anything

complicated.

I briefly explained the dish to Athena. “Will it work as a signature dish?”

“It’s not a bad idea, per se...” she said.

“But not a good one either?”

“I’m sure it’d be a hit, but all the prep and cooking would take too long all by myself.”

“Aaah... I didn’t consider that,” I admitted.

This city eatery was kept alive through the sole efforts of one enterprising young lady. She did everything from cooking to waiting tables to cleaning. Elaborate dishes were out of the question since their preparation would cause the rest of the operation to grind to a halt.

That must be why she served soup and grilled dishes the first time we came. Both are quick to make.

“In that case, how about a dish that uses plenty of spices?” I suggested.

“Even if I added something like that to the menu, I doubt that many people would be willing to pay for it.”

“I guess you’re right.” I get it now. Spices are expensive here, and cheap, convenient cans of curry powder aren’t available for sale in this world. I guess the next problem to tackle is the cost per serving.

Take the most extreme case—Athena prices the new dish at one gold coin per serving. Would anyone spend that amount of money at a restaurant in a working-class neighborhood? Common sense dictated that no one would.

So what’s a dish that’s both simple and cheap to make?

I was still spinning my wheels on the problem when a hand landed on my shoulder.

“You’re a kind man, Eizo,” Athena said with a soft smile. “Thank you.”

“What do you mean?”

“The fate of my shop isn’t yours to worry about. We barely know each other, you know? ”

“That doesn’t matter to me.” Be it friendship, trust, or respect—they either grew and blossomed with time, or they didn’t.

Regardless, there was a talented young woman standing in front of me whose future might be crushed before she reached her full potential. I couldn’t simply stand by and let that happen. And though I knew this was an entirely different case, I couldn’t help but reflect on the regrets of my previous life.

“See? Like I said, you’re kind,” Athena repeated.

I didn’t reply.

“So...what do you do for a living, Eizo?” she asked.

“Me?”

She nodded.

“I’m a blacksmith.”

Of course, with all my running around, sometimes even I forgot what it was I actually did. In any case, I thought of myself as your neighborhood middle-aged blacksmith, and that’s who I wanted to be.

Athena nodded, accepting my answer. “Your role as blacksmith is to make first-rate knives, right?”

“Yup.”

“Well, my role as a chef is to create a tasty, reasonably priced dish that I can make with my skills.”

All of a sudden, I realized what she was trying to say. I felt a flush of embarrassment.

Athena was younger than both the age of my inner self and that of my physical body. In fact, if I had been in my original body, we could’ve been mistaken for father and daughter. However, just because she was young didn’t mean that she lacked professional pride—I shouldn’t have made light of that. And there was no doubt that she was indeed a professional. She did run this shop by herself after all.

“I see...” I muttered at last. “You’re right...”

Athena looked at me and grinned.

“I’ll remember that,” I promised.

I changed the subject quickly before my eyes started to leak and began talking about our future arrangement. This delivery would be a slight deviation from my normal blacksmith work.

“I come to the city once every two weeks to make a delivery to Camilo. How about I drop off your meat along the way?”

“That would be great,” Athena said. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

“Pleasure’s all mine,” I replied.

And so, the two of us shook hands as equals. With this new arrangement, Forge Eizo’s workload had increased once again.

Chapter 4: Storage Sheds and Bows

The days flew by until it was time to make another delivery. From today onward, we were going to be adding a new stop on our delivery route. Along with the usual assortment of weaponry, we bundled up meat to bring into the city. Of course, the meat was bound for The Drinking Goose, not Camilo's shop.

The number of tasks on our to-do list had increased by one, but the broad strokes of our day remained unchanged: wind through the trees in the forest, ride down the thoroughfare, drop off the goods in the city, come home, and relax as we wished. And that is exactly what we did.

When we got back to the cabin, I gathered everyone for a meeting (a conversation, really) to discuss the upcoming days.

I kicked things off. "We're going to need a proper storehouse soon. We're getting by, but if we put off the construction until we actually need the extra space, it'll be too late."

"You're right," Diana agreed. "Once the harvest comes in, we're definitely going to need more storage."

"Plus," Rike added, "I want to stock up on more charcoal and ore if possible."

"Agreed. We can't keep storing meat and leather in the cabin forever, especially now that we're delivering some of the meat to the restaurant," said Samya.

Lidy chimed in last. "I have no objections. I doubt the field will yield much of a harvest, but it certainly will be difficult to store everything in here."

"Great. It looks like we're all in agreement," I said. "In that case, tomorrow, we'll start constructing two new storage rooms."

"While we're at it, shouldn't we add another bedroom or two?" Samya quipped.

I frowned. "Why would we? Our family's not going to get any bigger than

this.”

“Are you sure?” Diana asked, looking at me doubtfully. “Really, really sure?”

“I’m one hundred percent positive!”

Samya had brought up the topic, but it was clear that all four of the women were allied against me.

“Why don’t we go ahead and build one if there’s time?” Rike suggested.

“Yes, that sounds reasonable,” Diana agreed.

“No objections!” Samya shouted.

“I agree,” Lidy said, concluding the discussion.

My opinion on the matter was completely ignored.

We began construction the next day.

The plan was to build the storehouses next to Krul’s hut, so we cordoned off the land with rope and marked out where the foundational pillars would go.

My job was to dig out the holes for the pillars, a difficult task since the soil in the area was so hard. I used a spade-like tool to carve out the dirt bit by bit. In the meantime, Krul and the others brought over the lumber.

Krul enjoyed hauling the wooden beams around, and Diana was happy to see Krul happy.

What a heartwarming scene this is.

Once I finished digging the holes, I used thinner columns of lumber to tamp down the soil at the bottom. Then, I planted the pillars for the foundation. Krul helped out, brimming with enthusiasm, so the work ended up being a piece of cake.

Samya and I cut the extra lumber into planks with a wood saw. In the meantime, I had Diana and Rike lay down horizontal joints, the purpose of which was to elevate the storehouses to insulate the space from any heat rising from the ground. Both of them had experience with the work, so they had no problems.

In Lidy's village, the elves had handled any repairs themselves whenever possible; since elven villages were usually located in remote places, it was impractical to hire outside help for every little mending job. Lidy was shaky with some of the tasks, but overall, she needed little supervision.

In Rike's case, helping with construction had practically been half of her work back at her family's forge, and Diana had taken to the job like a fish to water. Maybe it was because she was a tomboy, or because her family was known for its military prowess, but either way, the speed she'd gotten used to everything was frightening.

Once the joints were in place, we placed the beams. Whenever I had downtime in the forge, I always made nails (and arrowheads), so we had plenty in stock. However, I didn't want to deplete our supply, so I fixed the beams to the pillars using dovetail tenons.

Our yard was now a construction site which, thankfully, qualified the work as production related, so I was able to leverage my cheats when carving the dovetails. We put down the beams without any hassle and topped the day (and rooms) off by laying the ridge beams.

Quite frankly, I hadn't imagined we would finish the frames of the two rooms so quickly. The cheats were a major reason we could work so fast, of course, but Krul was the real MVP. We couldn't have done it without her help.

"You're a lifesaver, Krul. Thanks," I said, stroking her head.

"*Kulululu!*" she chirruped back happily.

###

The next day, we tackled the rafters. Once again, Krul stole the show; with her help, we made great progress.

I cut the rafters to the right measurements, aided by my cheats, and we quickly installed them in both storage sheds.

Next, we moved on to the flooring. Working together as a family, we brought in the floorboards and nailed them to the joists. It was simple work, but even the smallest misalignment could throw the whole arrangement out of place. We were careful to lay each board snug up against its neighbors.

Since the sheds were roomy, it took a while to complete the flooring. Even though my cheats helped me work efficiently, there was a limit to how quickly a person could nail down a plank of wood. Truthfully, I was barely faster than anyone else.

We called it a day after that. With the flooring complete, the sheds felt like proper buildings.

###

On the third day, we planned to put up the walls.

First, we built door frames. After all, without an opening in the wall, we wouldn't be able to get in and out. Since the shed was for storage purposes, I decided that we should make them double doors, and we built the frames accordingly.

Our family worked in silence, and each one of us had a hammer in one hand to nail the planks to the support pillars. We started from the bottom of the walls and worked our way up—each ascending plank would overlap the lower one so that the bottom edge of each panel hung over the one beneath it. This arrangement would prevent rain from getting into the shed and help regulate the temperature.

Of course, my cheats helped throughout the process, though when I relied on them, the precision of the board placement left something to be desired. But, since I had practice laying the floorboards yesterday, today's work proceeded smoothly.

Though everything worked in my favor, given the size of the sheds, the walls took the entire day to finish. And even then, the sheds still lacked roofs and doors. At a glance, the structures looked like small huts whose tops had been whisked away by a tornado.

"We can finish tomorrow, I think," I told the others. "We just need to install the roofs."

"Agreed, but we can't forget about the doors either," Rike replied.

"That's right!" Samya chimed in.

And so, with our work wrapped for the day, we started to clean up.

###

Day four of construction was dedicated to roofing and doors—I asked the others to install the roof while I built the doors.

We needed two sets of double doors for the storehouses. In addition, I planned to make each individual door larger than a normal exterior door; this would make it easier to carry supplies in and out of the sheds. The doorframes we'd constructed yesterday were jumbo sized and were currently standing empty. Now, all I had to do was cut the doors to match that size.

First, I cut the lumber to the correct measurements. I built the skeleton frames of the doors and laid horizontal planks across them. Then, I carved four handles with my trusty knife and nailed them to the doors. Lastly, I installed L-shaped brackets above the handles for a latch to rest—this would prevent the doors from opening of their own volition.

I'd briefly considered making those latches the de facto door handles as well, but I gave up on that idea because the doors were too massive to move with a makeshift handle. Plus, I had no intention of reinforcing the latch and fixtures with metal (the way castle gates were reinforced). Luckily, thanks to either the stranger-repelling magic around the cabin or the dense concentration of magical energy in the Black Forest, neither people nor beasts frequented our clearing.

I was glad that carving the handles and other fixtures fell under the jurisdiction of my production-related cheats. Had that not been the case, it would've easily taken me two days just to craft the doors. However, with the cheats in effect, I finished the doors even before the others were done tiling the roofs.

Next on my list of tasks was to actually install the doors. However, they were too large and too heavy to be supported by the hinges we used for interior doors, so I let everyone know that I was going to forge new ones in the workshop.

Inside the forge, I heated up a few metal plates from our stockpile—which would be used to forge the bodies of the hinges—as well as some pins and

several bigger, sturdier nails. Each hinge was actually made of two pieces: one which would be attached to the frame and one to the door itself. The pins would secure those two halves together.

I wasn't fussy when it came to measurements; I could leave it all up to my cheats. The pace of my progress was satisfactory as well.

I hammered the metal plates out, lengthening the sheets to create hinges that would stretch halfway across the door's width. This way, the door's weight would be distributed evenly across the hinge, and the hinge would be less likely to break. Once I installed the doors, I expected that they would look similar to the gates found in Japanese castles.

The hinges didn't need to be hard, so I didn't quench or temper them—I would just install them as they were. However, since I hadn't submerged them in water, they were still burning hot, so I had to wait for them to cool. Unfortunately, my cheats had no control over that. In the meantime, I went to help the others with the roofs.

I'd based the roof design on the *tochibuki* roofing style of Japan, so we were tiling with wooden shingles. When complete, it would look similar to the roof of Krul's hut.

The women had split into pairs, with Samya and Diana working on one shed and Rike and Lidy on the other. The second pair had construction experience from working in their home forge and village respectively, so they were further along by one or two layers of shingles. Because of this, I buddied up with Samya and Diana—I took over fitting the shingles and had them lay the planks by the eaves on the other side of the shed.

Since the upper planks would overhang the bottom ones, the sheds should be adequately watertight (of course, the operative word here was "should").

"Does this region see any long spells of rain?" I shouted over to Samya and Diana. Both of them had grown up around here, so this was the perfect opportunity for me to ask.

"Hmmm," Samya pondered. "There are times when it rains *a lot*...but never for, say, two weeks in a row."

“That’s the same as my experience,” echoed Diana. “The longest period of rain I can remember lasted around a week.”

This region must have a rainy season similar to Japan. Any ground water around here couldn’t be very deep underground, otherwise the roots of the trees wouldn’t be able to reach it. Though, alternatively, the ecosystem here could be supported by a completely different water source.

“Is the rainy season coming soon?” I asked.

“Nah, it’s at least another month out,” Samya replied.

Her former den might’ve been in another part of the forest, but she’d lived here her whole life. Therefore, if she said it, I figured that it must be true.

Based on the calendar in my previous world, that put us around May. It was curious that this region had a rainy season even though it didn’t have a tropical or subtropical climate. Though, I suppose this could be explained by a few things. To begin with, the geography and terrain of this world could be completely different from Earth. To be honest, I didn’t even know if this world was spherical. Maybe this was a sign that I should discard all my climate knowledge from my previous world.

I thanked Samya and Diana for answering my questions and then returned my focus to my task.

When I’d finished shingling half the roof, I stopped and returned to the forge. By that time, the hinges and fixtures I’d made were completely cool. I carried them out to our makeshift construction site and set them near the gaping doorways of the sheds.

For the first door, I began by nailing the halves of the hinges to the doorframe, making sure the door would swing outward. This work was fairly straightforward. Next, I brought the doors over and installed the other hinge halves to one of the doors. My hinges were plain in design compared to the elaborate ones used in Japanese castles and traditional storehouses. Even the nails used back then were ornamental.

When I finished nailing the hinges down, I fitted the first door to the frame

and joined the two halves of the hinges with a thick pin. To test the motion, I swung the door open and closed. The hinges creaked quietly, but there was no issue with the movement.

One door down, three more to go.

Fortunately, the rest of the installation went quickly.

For the final step, I carved rectangular latches from some wood. I also used any leftover materials to make wedges that would serve as door stoppers.

After I was finished, I checked in with the others. It turned out that they were almost done with the roofs as well.

I left them to it, called Krul over, and harnessed her to the mini cart. “*Kulululu!*” she trilled happily. It was clear that she had nothing but fun and games on her mind. I needed her help with work, but it would be so much better if she had fun while doing it.

I told Krul to wait near the entrance of the workshop so I could bring out the charcoal and load it onto the mini cart. Once the cart was sufficiently full, I had Krul pull it back to the sheds. She was a huge help, and more than anything I was happy that she was enjoying herself.

Over at the sheds, I unlatched the doors, opened them, and inserted the door stoppers to prevent them from shutting unexpectedly. The floor of the sheds and the platform of the mini cart were nearly the same height, so I could easily transfer the supplies into the shed.

I made two or three trips until I had transferred half of our charcoal supply into the sheds. However, I didn’t move any of the ore or steel since we would need them tomorrow. After future supply runs to Camilo’s, we could store the new supplies—charcoal and ore—directly in the shed.

The next thing I did was load the second shed with our reserves of dried meat. Though four out of five people in our family were women, it nevertheless took a lot to feed a family our size. We had Krul to think about too. Our household consumed food quickly, but over time, we had built up a sizable reserve. It was a blessing to have the extra storage space now.

Even after I brought in the meat, there was still plenty of room left in the

second shed. In the future, maybe we could procure extra jars to use for salt-pickled goods—there was plenty of room to store all of that here.

There was a limited amount of space within the cabin and when the rainy season came, fresh meat would not only spoil quicker but be harder to dry. Therefore, we would eventually need to develop a different way to preserve food. Even with extra jars of pickled food, I calculated that there should still be extra room in the second shed. We could use that space for wheat or anything else we managed to grow in the field.

With those plans in mind, I decided that the first shed where I put the charcoal would be reserved for raw crafting materials, and the second with the meat would be for food storage.

I glanced up at the roofs to check on how the work was going. The women were only a row or two of shingles away from finishing up, so there was no need for me to lend a hand.

Instead, I picked up two small pieces of wood that were left over from the construction. Using my knife and my cheats, I carved the word “Food” into one and “Raw Materials” into the other. I nailed the signs above the doors of the respective sheds and stepped back to admire my handiwork.

After that, I had Krul help me bring our supply of ready-to-use dried timber over to the materials shed.

Just as I had finished storing everything, I heard Rike shout, “We’re finished over here!”

“Us too!” Diana yelled.

“Got it!” I called back. “Watch your step on the way down!”

The four of them yelled their acknowledgments.

With everyone’s help, I’d added three outbuildings to our clearing since coming to this world: Krul’s hut, the food shed, and the materials shed.

As I was admiring our progress, Diana came up beside me. “Taking it all in like this, the house is starting to become a proper estate,” she said appreciatively.

“Yeah. Now that we have so much storage, we’ll have to ask Camilo for help

to fill it up.”

“Boss, you can’t just buy things willy-nilly,” Rike admonished.

“You *do* go overboard sometimes, Eizo,” Samya added.

“All right, all right,” I relented. “I’ll be careful.” At that, everyone laughed.

###

Every time we went to Camilo’s, we delivered two weeks’ worth of inventory, but technically, if we focused, we could finish forging everything in one week. The sheds had taken four days to construct, which meant that we had three additional free days.

There was no question about what to do with the time.

That’s right—you guessed it. I’d gotten my hands on some appoitakara from Camilo! Except...no, wait, that wasn’t right. I had to make hunting bows first.

Since I’d never made a bow before, I figured that challenging myself to create a new type of weapon could lead to growth in my skills; it was a useful experiment to run.

In the meantime, I also had to think carefully about what I wanted to make with the appoitakara.

However, there was one possible issue with my plan.

My most powerful cheat was blacksmithing (seeing as I was a blacksmith and all). It was not, unfortunately, weaponsmithing. I had been granted a general “production” cheat as well, but my skills on that front were several levels lower than my smithing abilities.

My skills *did* outclass the average craftsman, but I didn’t have a clear sense of my limits on that front. Through crafting the bow, I wanted to test exactly how far I could push my abilities.

The day we finished the sheds, I discussed my ideas with everyone over dinner. After I finished explaining, the three hunters (although Lidy often stayed behind) gave their opinions first.

“Sounds like a solid plan to me,” Samya said.

“Personally, it would be a great help to me,” Diana added. “I would be more helpful on the hunts if I had a bow.”

“I can lend you a hand making them,” Lidy offered.

Rike didn’t have strong opinions about my plan, but in the end, she asked, “It’s your first time making a wooden weapon, right, Boss?”

“That’s right. Don’t be surprised if it turns out wonky.”

And so, it was settled—starting tomorrow, I would switch my focus to crafting bows. Everyone else would continue along their usual schedules, except that hunting would be put on pause until I finished (no pressure or anything) for the vague reason that it felt appropriate.

###

The next day, after finishing my morning chores, I stopped by the raw materials shed. I picked a few pieces of lumber that looked to be a good size and carried them to the workshop.

With the extra charcoal, wood, and raw materials gone (not to mention the dried meat we’d been storing in the forge since we’d had no other place to put it), the workshop looked clean and tidy. It was perhaps neater than even when I’d first come to live here. On the negative side, the room now looked impersonal, but I figured that it didn’t much matter whether a forge looked “lived in” or not.

The others were working in the forge as well, making plate metal. Alongside them, I split the lumber into pieces, picked out relatively supple ones, and then cut my selections into planks. I further split each plank into three, creating three slim bars of wood. After that, all I had to do was cut each bar into the right shape. I felt lucky that I’d once seen a video about how to make a bow back on Earth.

The handles of bows were generally C-shaped, but I had to decide whether I wanted it to be a concave or convex curve. The profile of a classic Japanese bow was convex overall but concave at the ends where the bowstring was attached. Though, the actual shapes were incredibly complex, with specific names for

each part of the curve.

Since the bows would be used primarily for hunting in the forest, a shortbow seemed like the best option. I based my design on early Japanese bows called *maruki*, which were simple and made of a single piece of wood—Samya's current bow was of the same type.

However, this *was* a rare opportunity, and I wanted to flex my skills. So, I decided to leverage my blacksmithing skills and fit a thin strip of metal to the handles to make a concave composite bow.

First, I shaved down the wooden bars even thinner. The wood was the foundation, so it couldn't be too narrow or too wide. It was important that the bow had structural integrity but was flexible enough to be drawn and released. Between my good ol' trusty knife and my cheats, I struck just the right balance.

At this point, all I had was a plain piece of wood. The next step was to make the steel strip that would be attached to it.

The leaf springs I'd made had been built from strips of metal as well, but those had been thick; a human wouldn't be able to draw a bow made using those strips. As I worked, I considered the relative strength levels of Samya, Diana, and Lidy, and visualized the final product.

There's no choice but to leave it to my cheats. Hopefully they'll pull through for me...

I slid the plate metal into the firebed and waited for it to come to the right temperature. Then, I transferred the heated metal to the anvil and hammered it out, imbuing it with magic. I shaped the strip into an arc with juuust the right thickness.

When I was happy with the shape, I returned the slim arc of steel back to the fire to prepare it for quenching. Similar to the ones I'd used for the leaf springs, the metal rib for the bow would have to be both hard and flexible, although it wouldn't be subject to nearly as much force as the suspension system.

The metal hissed sharply when it made contact with the cold water. Once it had cooled sufficiently, I pulled it out. I then held it above the firebed—warming it gently by the tips of the flickering flames—to temper it.

I repeated the same steps, making two more strips of varying thicknesses (I left the exact measurements to the discretion of my cheats). The thickness of each strip was based on my observations—since I saw the women work on a daily basis, I had a pretty good perception of their different strength levels.

After I'd finished with the smithing, I carried the finished bars over to where the wooden strips were waiting. I bent the wooden strips to align with the steel arcs—since my blacksmithing cheats were the most effective, I figured that the metal strips were more accurately made.

I fixed the wooden and metal bars together, making sure that the arcs nestled tightly. The two different materials would support and bolster each other. Steel could be supple but not nearly as much as wood. Wood was flexible but could not hold a candle to steel's strength.

By the time I finished making all three sets of composite handles, the day was already over. I wasn't used to this type of work, so this project had taken a significant amount of time.

"I'll string them tomorrow," I declared.

Samya, who had been helping Rike clean, replied, "Oh, let us do that."

"Why not?" I agreed easily. "They're going to be your bows anyway. Besides, I've never done it before."

It was a common misconception that bows only had to be strung once—actually, the string was removed when the bow wasn't being used and it had to be restrung every time. Samya always strung her own bow before her hunts and removed the string when she returned. And since the only bow in the house was Samya's, I didn't have any experience with using or maintaining a bow.

I'll leave the finishing touches to the expert.

"Sweet. After we string the bows, we can take them out on a test run!" Samya said enthusiastically.

"I'm counting on you."

"You got it!" Samya's face lit up with a bright smile. Her good mood was

infectious and it drew smiles from everyone else too.

###

The next morning, we said our prayers together in the workshop before I distributed the bows to the three hunters.

“I tried to make these to match your relative physical capabilities, but let me know if anything feels off,” I told them.

The three hunters strung their bows with fiber made from deer tendons. The string was tied to one end of the bow, drawn across to the other side, and fastened to the opposite end.

Samya was using the string she’d used on her other bow, so it was already the right length. The other two had to cut off the excess ends with their knives.

Lidy, who had archery experience from her life in the elven village, made short work of the task (as I’d expected), but even Diana strung her bow with a speed and tidiness that surpassed my expectations. Yes, she occasionally practiced archery with Samya, but still...

When I asked Diana about it, she told me that she’d had plenty of experience with a bow while growing up.

What is it exactly that the Eimoors teach their children? Supposing Marius weds and has a girl, is he going to have her trained up to Diana’s level? Or is Diana an exception? If all the women in the Eimoor family are trained so thoroughly, we could see the birth of a legendary female warrior like Tomoe Gozen or Hangaku Gozen from back on Earth.

The test was conducted outside. Samya went first.

She stood a distance away from the tree that she and Diana used as a target during their practice sessions. Planting her feet, she settled into the proper stance, nocked an arrow, and drew the bow.

Her technique wasn’t the same as what was taught in *kyudo*—Japanese archery—but it was elegant in its own way. Her movements had been honed with the purpose of taking a life, and over time she’d polished her style to best

suit her.

She released the arrow.

It sliced through the air, and I swore I could see the wind swirling around it. Before I could even blink, it'd sunk into the heart of its intended target.

"Awesome!" Samya shouted.

That's one approval in the bag!

"Does it feel all right?" I asked.

"All right? It's perfect!" she exclaimed. "I've never had an arrow fly as true as the one just now! Thanks!" Still holding the bow, she bounded over and wrapped me up in a tight squeeze. I didn't know which I felt more acutely: happiness or pain.

I pried myself loose from Samya. Next, it was Diana and Lidy's turns.

Diana got into position and drew her bow. I hadn't been sure how much strength a regular woman had. Surely, she wasn't a match for Helen, but I expected her to be fairly strong and had made the bow accordingly.

She let the arrow fly. It was fast, but not as fast as Samya's had been. Regardless, it struck the tree with a *thunk*.

"How is it?" I asked.

"It feels great. The tension is just right—not too tight or too loose."

"Good to hear." There didn't seem to be any adjustments I'd have to make to Diana's bow either.

Last up was Lidy. She took up her position in front of the tree. Out of the three, her bow took the least amount of strength to draw.

Her arrow, when she released it, was slower than Diana's, but it still hit dead-on.



“Mine is also perfect as is,” she remarked afterward.

“Good,” I said.

Since none of their bows needed tweaking, the three of them gathered their belongings and immediately set off to hunt, taking Krul with them.

Rike and I stayed behind. The rest of the day was ours to do with as we wished.

“The bows will come in handy on our trips to the city, but I want to make a few more long-distance weapons,” I told Rike.

“That makes sense.”

In the case of the “bandit” (Nilda), I’d already had a vague idea of what kind of enemy we were dealing with and could react accordingly when she ambushed us. However, for enemies that were entirely unknown or unexpected, it would be best to face them from a distance or fend them off while seeking an opening to escape. It was a good idea to forge a few weapons to prepare for that contingency.

With that goal in mind, I decided to make two new types of items: the first was an atlatl, which was used to throw spears at higher velocity using the principle of leverage, and the second was a javelin, which could be loaded into the former. Normally, both were made out of wood, but I decided to make them from steel in order to take full advantage of my blacksmithing cheats. This was a good opportunity to check and see if my skills had leveled up from crafting the bows.

As usual, I heated the plate metal until it was malleable. One tip of an atlatl was hooked, and the other was a curved grip. I shaped both using my blacksmithing cheats.

It does feel like my skills have improved slightly... That means I can advance my abilities by making new types of items. Since I’m making the atlatl and javelin today, I should see improvement in my skills tomorrow. If that’s the case, there’s merit to challenging myself to craft different kinds of weapons and tools, even if I don’t plan to sell them or have an immediate use for them.

I shaped the atlatl to be a moderate length and thickness—a long or weighty javelin would be too heavy to wield. Since it was a tool for the family to use, I bolstered its durability with magic.

Next was the javelin. I didn't need to be as precise with the weight of the javelin, and a heavier one would have more power behind it anyway. I elongated the steel into a long, thin rod about a meter long.

Then, I forged the spearhead out of a second piece of metal. I shaped it into a pyramid, optimizing the shape for piercing—since it was a throwing weapon, it didn't need a bladed edge for slicing. Finally, I attached the two parts together to create the finished javelin.

A weapon like this had to be durable and sturdy, so I imbued it with magic (of course) and also quenched and tempered it. The finished javelin looked like a long, thin pipe tipped with a spearhead.

Neither the atlatl nor the javelin had been difficult to make, and my blacksmithing cheats helped with both, so I was able to finish before Samya and the other two returned from their hunt.

“Might as well try them out since I have the time,” I muttered.

I left Rike behind in the forge, where she was practicing weaving magic into metal, and went outside to the yard with the atlatl and javelin to perform the inaugural throw.

First, I was going to throw the javelin with my bare hands. My combat cheats put my skills far above that of the average human, so I would have to mentally discount their effects, but it will be a useful experiment regardless.

The lawn—or clearing, rather—around the cabin was spacious. It was definitely at least one to two hundred meters from end to end. If it'd been smaller, Samya and Diana wouldn't have been able to practice archery here, and we wouldn't have had the space to expand the cabin.

I was happy to measure the distance that the javelin flew by eye alone. When the time came to actually use the javelin, it was not like we'd have a laser distance measuring tool to help us calculate precisely how far we'd need to throw.

I hoisted the javelin up by my ear, took a few steps forward for momentum, and hurled it. Back in my previous world, the world record for the javelin throw was about one hundred meters. Obviously, I wasn't able to throw it that far. By my estimate, the javelin landed about fifty meters in front of me, which was good enough for it to be used as a device to intimidate any enemies.

The next experiment was to throw the javelin using the atlatl. I loaded the javelin up and let it fly.

With the atlatl providing leverage, the javelin flew even farther than I had expected, nearly tripling the distance it'd gone when I'd thrown it by hand. It struck the ground about 140 meters away. I remembered seeing a performer in my previous world launch a spear with an atlatl and pierce a balloon one hundred meters away. This tool definitely showed promise.

However, a spear would never be as precise as an arrow, and for short distances, a slingshot (a handheld one, not something huge like a trebuchet) was more convenient because it was easier to procure ammunition. You could carry several times more pellets and small projectiles than arrows or spears. That was the reason bows and spears that'd been heavily used during Earth's ancient times had largely fallen out of use in the modern era.

That being said, anyone would be terrified to see an all-metal spear flying toward their face. I didn't know if there was a javelineer unit in the kingdom's military, but even an expert spear-thrower wouldn't be able to launch a counterattack if they didn't also have atlatls on hand. Besides, by the time any enemy could throw a spear back, we would've already bought enough time for our archers to fire a volley of arrows.

In conclusion, there was definitely value in making the atlatl and javelin.

Once I had tested the two weapons to my heart's content, I set myself to making two backup javelins with the remaining time in the day. After all, the atlatl was useless without projectiles to fire.

I finished my work and tidied up before Rike was done on her end, so I went over to check the knife she'd been imbuing with magic. It fell just a single step short of the elite models I made, but its quality was exceptionally high for an entry-level model. If this had been a normal forge, she could've taken her skills

as they were and returned to her family forge.

When I said that to Rike, she replied, “My goal is to forge items with the quality of your custom models.”

“You’ll be here a long time then,” I said.

“I’m counting on it! Otherwise, there would’ve been no point in becoming your apprentice!” She gave a determined sniff.

“That’s true.”

When she’d first moved in, neither she nor I had known about the existence of magic. By leveraging her dwarven knowledge about the composition of metal, I had figured she’d be able to reach elite model quality. However, now that we’d learned about magic, custom models no longer seemed out of her reach. It was, however, frustrating that I couldn’t teach her anything, since all my skills were from cheats that had been granted to me.

Observe me carefully and steal everything you can, Rike! When the day came for Rike to return home, I knew I would feel unbearably lonely, but I kept that thought hidden in my heart and smiled gently back at her.

After Rike and I had closed up shop, the rattle of the wooden clackers in the forge alerted us that the three hunters were home.

“We’re back!” Samya hollered as she burst into the workshop.

Someone’s in a good mood.

“Welcome home,” I said.

“Thanks to your bows, we took down our biggest boar to date!” she exclaimed.

That must be the reason why she’s in such high spirits.

“That’s great news. I’m glad I made them.”

“It made a huge difference,” Diana said, “that all three of us could attack it together.”

“We launched our offense before it noticed anything out of the ordinary,”

Lidy added.

The two of them had been stuck in the role of beaters until now, so it must've been exciting for them to be able to play a more adaptable role.

"I'll bring out my A-game for lunch tomorrow!" I promised.

"Yahoo!" Samya whooped, and everyone laughed as Rike quickly hushed her.

And so ended another peaceful day at Forge Eizo.

Chapter 5: A Day in the Life

The next morning, the five of us and Krul went to the lake. The trip was nothing new, but I still made sure to bring a shortsword for self-defense. Rike brought along her axe (primarily because she would need it to chop down trees), and the other three carried their bows.

It was a load off my mind to have finally increased our arsenal. The weapons might not fare so well against a magical ambush, but since magic users were rare in this world, chances were slim that we'd run into such an issue (source: Lidy). The biggest threat to us in this forest was bears.

Krul was excited to be going out with everyone. We traveled through the forest at a leisurely pace, and it felt like we were on our way to have a picnic.

Along the way, I spotted an animal I'd never seen before.

Well...not *never* per se—it looked nearly identical to a tiger.

Come to think of it, tiger-type beastfolk like Samya did exist, so it stood to reason that tigers roamed this world as well.

It was obvious enough what I was looking at, but since this was my first time seeing one roaming in Black Forest, I asked Samya for confirmation. "Is that a tiger?"

"Yup," she replied. "It's rare for one to come to these parts."

"It's not going to attack us, is it?"

"If it'd wanted to, it would've done so already. It's noticed us for sure. We'll be fine as long as we don't provoke it," she said without any concern. "I used to see them more often when I lived to the north and west, but we're in wolf territory right now. Tigers don't usually prowl here."

"Could it have been chased here by a bear?" I asked.

"I think a bear would've driven it farther north, closer to the opposite shore of the lake. It probably came here in pursuit of prey. Anyway, tiger sightings *are*

rare, but you see one or two once in a while.”

“You’re not related to any of them, right?”

“No!” Samya snapped.

I doubted that beastfolk appreciated having their past connections to the animal kingdom mentioned. However, I had no choice but to ask... It would’ve been so awkward if she had suddenly said, “Isn’t that the voice of my friend, Li Zheng?”

“Sorry,” I said.

“It’s fine. But just to let you know, I can’t speak to tigers either.”

“Okay, okay, I understand.”

If she was able to communicate with tigers, it would have made the Li Zheng scenario all the more plausible... Though, admittedly, a poet turning into a man-eating tiger was a rather niche circumstance.

The tiger watched us for a while longer before turning tail and stalking back into the shadowy depths of the forest. Samya theorized that it’d come here chasing prey, but it hadn’t seemed hungry. After all, there was a veritable buffet of animals here for it to hunt if it’d been in the mood.

Besides that one rare encounter, our trip to the lake was uneventful.

The hunters had sunk the boar corpse into the lake, and Samya hadn’t lied about its size—this thing was massive. Even from the shore, I could clearly see it beneath the water. Samya had hunted down some pretty hefty boars in the past, but this one took the grand prize for size by a mile.

We waded into the waters and tied a rope around the boar’s body so Krul could help us pull it to shore. Even with five people, it would’ve been exhausting to drag it out without the aid of Krul’s strength.

Samya, Diana, and I took the rope in our hands; Krul took her place in the line as well. As one, we yanked on the rope. Even with Krul’s help, the boar was heavy—it must’ve weighed at least three hundred kilograms, and that was after its innards had been removed! Its organs alone had probably been quite an

extravagant feast for the wolves around here.

Finally, after much heaving, the boar's body crested the surface of the lake. We dragged it all the way to where Rike was waiting with a pallet she'd made out of timber. It was a struggle to load the boar onto the platform—the body was extremely difficult to lift, which was a first for us considering our party included a dwarf, one of the beastfolk, a drake, and me, with my cheat-enhanced strength. If Krul hadn't been with us, we might not have been able to take it home at all.

The boar's body was bulging out and overhanging the pallet. We secured it with rope, tying up its legs as well, which was no mean feat because of its sheer bulk. Once it was secured good and tight, we all threw our backs into hauling the platform back to the cabin. Thanks to Krul, we were still able to travel at a good pace, though admittedly we were slower than usual. Between our combined efforts, we managed to get the boar home just past noon.

Back at the cabin, we strung the gigantic boar up in a tree. This task took every ounce of strength we had. Of course, Krul was a major help; honestly, without her, there was no way we could've lifted the boar's body.

The butchering also took more time and effort since the boar was humongous, but process-wise, the work was fairly standard. Without my custom model knives though, we might not have managed it.

All hail our lord and savior: my cheats!

With all five of us chipping in to help butcher the body, we broke the boar down into usable cuts of meat and by-products in around an hour. I set aside enough fresh meat for today's meals, and we carried the rest to the food shed. Later, we would either cure the pieces with salt or dry them.

Thank god we'd finished constructing the shed... Otherwise, we would've had to somehow dry the meat in the workshop—all three hundred (or thereabouts) kilograms of it.

By the time we'd finished with the boar, noon had come and gone, though it was still a few hours before dusk. Everyone, including me, was starving, and they all started *demanding* food.

Well, I *had* promised everyone a feast today. So, I brought the fresh meat into the house and got to work.

There were tons of dishes I could've quickly whipped up to satisfy everyone's growling stomachs, but I wanted to cook something delicious as a reward for all our hard work. I hoped everyone (including me) could be patient for a while longer.

I first took out a cutting board and minced the boar meat with a knife. No matter how hard I tried, I was never going to do as thorough a job as a mechanical mincer could, but I chopped the meat as finely and evenly as possible.

Once minced, I transferred the meat into a wooden bowl. I had neither onions nor garlic, so I kneaded the meat with only salt and pepper until it started to stick together. Splitting the meat into five portions, I rolled them into balls, then flattened and indented the patties slightly in the middle.

The stove required a fire, and I stoked one until it was at medium heat. If I'd been using a gas stove, I would've been able to control the temperature with a knob. With an induction cooktop, I would've simply had to press a button. However, this stove used charcoal as fuel, so I didn't have fine control over the temperature. The others would have to forgive me if I accidentally burned the food.

With the stove going, I heated a pan and greased it with boar fat. Then, I placed the five patties into the pan. I grilled them on one side for around three minutes before flipping them over, and after, I poured a splash of brandy into the pan. All that was left was to cover the pan with a lid and let the juices reduce for three more minutes.

In my previous world, medium-rare meat was popular...but I wasn't brave enough to eat semi-rare boar meat taken fresh from the wild.

I fed the fire with more charcoal. When I removed the lid, a mouthwatering scent drifted up from the pan. I kept the patties on the fire for only a smidge longer before removing them from the heat.

Order up!

The dish of the day was burger patties! Or, at least, a close imitation featuring wild boar meat...

I served the patties, along with the sauce I usually made for steaks. The meat would've been perfect topped with cheese or sunny-side up eggs, but I simply didn't have the ingredients.

As soon as I brought out the meal, Samya whooped in joy. Her eyes were glittering with excitement.

We all said *itadakimasu* together and then dug in.

"I've had a similar dish before, but your version is delicious," Diana remarked. She was the daughter of a comital family, so she had eaten a variety of dishes growing up and was well-versed in cuisine.

"Aaah, so this dish *does* exist here," I replied.

Two important and fundamental techniques had gone into the preparation of this dish: first, mincing up scraps or tough portions to tenderize the meat, and second, cooking everything thoroughly to allay any risk of eating raw meat. They were great techniques, but because they were so basic, it wasn't a surprise that cooks used them in this world too.

"Your dish is more polished than what I've eaten before," Diana added.

Hmmm, maybe the chef had stopped at rolling the meat into a simple ball? The steps in the recipe Diana spoke of couldn't have been very different... After all, hamburger patties weren't exactly advanced—they had been around in my previous world for several generations before my time.

"I never ate anything like this back at home," Rike said. "When we ate meat, it was mostly dried."

Not everyone had easy access to fresh meat. Preparing the meat took skill too—in fact, there was a recipe book in Japan solely dedicated to preparing Jinhua ham. Jerky recipes must be a staple in this world.

I thought back to the dwarven stereotypes I'd learned from fiction in my old world. As far as I'd heard, dwarves weren't exactly known for their haute chefs. However, I'd once had a conversation with Rike about cooking, and she'd told

me that there *were* dwarven cooks in towns that housed large dwarf communities. In other words, there were skilled dwarven chefs that could prepare intricate recipes.

Lidy added her two cents next. “We rarely ate meat in my village, so it’s my first time eating a dish like this.”

Elves were known for being vegetarians, but they didn’t shun meat the way I had thought. Rather, they were largely dependent on farming as their source of sustenance. Visitors to elven villages had simply drawn their own (incorrect) conclusions over the years.

Here at Forge Eizo, I served meat—either fresh or preserved—every day. Lidy ate the same menu as everyone else, and the unfamiliar food had yet to make her sick.

“Well, you know what they say: hunger is the best spice,” I recited.

“This would be tasty even if I weren’t starving!” Samya insisted loudly. She’d apparently fallen in love with the dish.

“I got it, I got it. I’ll make it again when I have time,” I promised.

The patty was tender, flavorful without being gamey, and undeniably delicious... However, the drawback was the time-consuming prep.

Since I was a blacksmith, I could make a mechanical mincer for us...but now I was getting ahead of myself. I decided to stop thinking and just enjoy my meal.

Everyone started clamoring about what kinds of foods they wanted to try, so the rest of lunch was a rowdy affair.

###

For the next three days, we returned to our normal routine—focusing on forging knives and swords for our delivery to Camilo. As usual, Rike was in charge of entry-level models while I made elite models.

However, one thing *had* changed—my speed had increased. Either my body was growing used to the work, or I had leveled up my cheats. Unfortunately, I couldn’t pinpoint the exact reason, so I also couldn’t conclude that forging a wide variety of weapons had increased my pace.

Regardless, from now on, I resolved to dedicate at least one day between deliveries to making something new.

Who knows, I might even hit on a new product to add to the Forge Eizo lineup... Next time we're at Camilo's, I'll ask him what sells well.

###

Delivery day came. We loaded the cart with the newly forged items as well as the weapons we wielded for our self-defense. We hitched up Krul, who was excited by the prospect of the journey, and then set off.

The wagon clattered as we wound through the forest. Occasionally, snippets of bird song filtered through the clamorous racket our wagon made. Rike was now an old hand at steering, so we progressed through the forest quickly.

Did that tiger already return to its own territory? All is good as long as we don't run into a bear... A fight where both the bear and my family are injured is nothing but a lose-lose situation for everyone involved.

Under Rike's able hands, our drake-drawn cart soon emerged onto the road. We picked up speed.

Today, we had three new projectile weapons at our disposal. The crowded confines of the forest could obscure an enemy, but out here on the plains, we could spot a foe coming from a mile away. And if we did spot something dangerous, we were prepared to attack at once.

Krul was running hard, and everyone else was geared up for necessary defense, but overall, the mood was leisurely and easy.

When we arrived at the city gate, we greeted the guard, who was equipped with a halberd. The guard didn't look as anxious as he had the last couple of times, so I figured that Marius must've finally disseminated the news that the "thief" (Nilda) was no longer a threat in this area.

With little fanfare, we made our way into the city.

We took our time riding to Camilo's, and I noticed that the number of people blatantly staring at us had decreased compared to our last visit. Even though we weren't here very often, the city residents were slowly getting used to us.

The streets were lively but busy, and the atmosphere wasn't boisterous so much as hectic. Everyone seemed to be rushing about their business. We picked our way through this hustle and bustle and soon made it to Camilo's store.

After leaving the cart in the storehouse and bringing Krul around back, we went up to the conference room and waited for Camilo. Eventually, he and the head clerk came in, both looking a touch more harried than usual.

"You look busy," I remarked.

"Just a tad." Camilo's words seemed a bit clipped. He was only evasive like this when he was under strain, but I decided not to ask. Instead, I prioritized our negotiation, and my straightforward approach seemed to suit Camilo just fine.

"We brought our usual inventory," I told him. "You'll find javelins and bows in the cart, but those aren't for sale, so please set those aside."

"Got it." Camilo signaled the head clerk with his eyes, and the clerk nodded in response. Camilo then continued. "I have some news. I found a supplier for your seed potatoes."

"Oh, really? I appreciate it."

Potatoes would pave my way to a hermetic life in the forest. Of course, we couldn't rely on potatoes as our only food source, but they'd be helpful to have.

"I'm still trying to obtain northern spices, but..." Camilo trailed off.

"But...?" I pressed.

"There's trouble brewing in the empire to the north," he revealed, "and it's been difficult to import goods into the kingdom."

"Trouble, you say? I see. Well, like I said, there's no rush—don't fret over it."

"Thanks for understanding," Camilo said. "Anyway, regarding that trouble, there's actually something I wanted your help with."

"I'll tell you now, I don't have any patrons or supporters I can ask for help."

Camilo shot me a wry smile. "Nor did I expect you to."

Technically, I could probably count on the Eimoor family's support, but so could Camilo. There would be no reason for me to play the middleman in that

scenario.

“One part of the strategy, as it were, is weaponry,” Camilo explained, getting straight to the point. “To that end, I wanted to commission you to forge another batch of weapons.”

“A batch job, huh?”

Since my forging speed had increased, I could make a decent amount of weapons in a short time. I figured that there shouldn’t be any issues taking on the commission, though the feasibility depended on what exactly he was asking for.

“I don’t mind, but in exchange...”

“Yes?” asked Camilo.

“For starters, can you explain what’s going on?”

I couldn’t blindly accept the commission without knowing anything about the situation.

Before he explained, Camilo took some time to think, as was his habit. As usual, he was probably considering how much to tell me... I knew he tried not to embroil me in any trouble. However, I had a feeling there was something more to this situation.

It would’ve been insensitive for me to ask what he was worrying about. Perhaps one day he’d tell me of his own volition.

After several moments of pondering, he spoke. “Will you keep what I’m about to say secret from outside parties?”

“There’s no one for me to tell.”

“That’s true, I suppose,” he retorted with an upward quirk of his lips.

Camilo was one of the few people who knew exactly where I lived. Our house was the only residence in the middle of a forest that no one entered to begin with. Therefore, I didn’t regularly speak to anyone outside of my household, all of whom were currently in the room. Guests came to our forge once in a blue moon, but otherwise, we had no visitors. I cast my gaze around to the others to confirm and received affirmative nods. None of them were in contact with

anyone else either.

The secret was safe with me.

Camilo watched our exchange then took a breath and began to talk. “I’ll spare you the details, but long story short, there’s a revolution brewing in the neighboring empire. The leaders of the revolt have declared their intention to overthrow the current emperor and install public rule in the monarchy’s place.”

“That’s not good news,” I said.

“Certainly not. Our kingdom plans to take advantage of the resulting chaos to minutely expand our territory,” Camilo continued.

“The count will be leading the charge, I presume?”

“No,” countered Camilo, “the margrave. Though Count Eimoor, of course, is an instrumental figure in his plan.”

“Uh-huh... I see.”

Margrave Mentzel acted like a guardian to Marius and, by extension, the Eimoor family. By now, His Lordship the margrave had no doubt sussed out the fact that I wasn’t nobility, but rather just a run-of-the-mill, middle-aged blacksmith.

“Why the roundabout approach? Is it to prevent Marius from gaining any more status?” I asked.

“Exactly. The kingdom wants to avoid showing favoritism and prevent him from accruing too much power.”

“He already has one successful military campaign under his belt,” I reasoned. “If he adds another one so soon after inheriting the title, then the Eimoors’ reputation is going to skyrocket. It’ll displease the nobility if the common folk are lauding just one family’s military prowess. Did I get that right?”

“Got it in one,” Camilo confirmed. “However, the margrave is disinclined to yield the opportunity and any related accolades to those outside his inner circle. Because of that, he’s requested your services.”

“By going through Marius?”

“Yes.”

So, the jig was truly up—the margrave had definitely realized my true identity. Though, it’s not as if I’d hidden it well... It didn’t make any sense for a member of the northern elite to be tagging along with the supply train on a military expedition to eliminate a monster nest. I wasn’t sure if he’d also discovered that I was the one who’d forged the Eimoors’ heirloom sword.

“Well, I can’t turn down a commission from His Lordship, now can I?” I said. “So? What will I be making?”

“Twenty spears and thirty longswords,” Camilo said.

“That’s...a smaller amount than I expected.”

“The kingdom can’t move very many troops at once, otherwise the plans will be exposed. Our campaign to win over new land will be conducted using the bare minimum of forces.”

“I see.”

“By the way...the deadline is in a week,” said Camilo. “I’m sorry about the short notice.”

“Next week, eh?”

“Not possible?”

I took a minute to consider the parameters. For the last bulk order, I’d forged fifty-five swords with no problems. I could forge twenty spears myself and leave the swords to Rike. It would be a tight deadline, but doable. Besides, I could work faster now than I used to.

“No, we can do it,” I concluded. “We’ll see you in a week for the delivery.”

“I’m counting on you.”

We sealed the deal with a firm handshake, and I prayed we would both manage to avoid being wrapped up in any trouble.

For the bulk order, we would need extra raw materials, which Camilo arranged for us to take home. The head clerk left to work out the logistics and have everything loaded into our cart. In the meantime, Camilo and I continued

our discussion.

“Incidentally, did you deliver the letter I gave you last time?” I asked. “The one about the robber?”

The bandit’s true identity had been a demon named Nilda—she’d been lurking around these parts to find me and commission a katana.

“Hm? Ah, yes, it’s been delivered. And from the count’s perspective, the news could not have come at a better time. Had the robber been roaming the area for longer, the circulation of goods would’ve suffered. Also the guards’ patrol fees had ballooned to a...sizable...expenditure,” Camilo said. “Officially, the robber has been driven away, and a reward hasn’t been demanded.”

“I’m glad.”

That was another success under Marius’s belt—he’d subdued the robber without any damage or repercussions to the area. However, this triumph was likely another reason why the nobility didn’t want to put him front and center during the upcoming campaign. Regardless, Marius had no choice but to keep his cool and shrug it off.

I realized all over again what a crazy world the nobility lived in. It was a good thing I hadn’t carelessly requested to be an aristocrat in my second life... I was getting heartburn just imagining all the political hoops I would’ve had to jump through.

After that, we changed topics. Camilo’s experiments with the suspension system were proceeding, if slowly. They’d recently installed a prototype on a cart, which had gone on a test run to the capital and back. The mechanism wasn’t all that complicated to begin with, so at this rate, mass production was just over the horizon. However, I hadn’t taught Camilo about shock absorbers.

If he manages to develop them independently, I’ll have him teach me or I’ll buy some from him.

The rest of our conversation consisted mostly of small talk, though “small talk” wasn’t synonymous with unimportant—these matters were certainly of interest, but they just didn’t have an immediate impact on my daily life. Conversation topics included which regions had a rough wheat harvest and the

recent decrease in local bandit activity.

We continued chatting for a while until the head clerk called for us. He came with a pouch of silver coins in hand.

Now then, time to go home.

We left the conference room and returned to the courtyard. Our cart had been piled high with supplies.

We quickly hitched Krul back up, and I stroked her neck. “The load is heavier than usual today,” I told her. “Do your best.”

“Kulululu,” she trilled, seeming to grow more excited by the news.

Are all drakes so enthusiastic about pulling heavy things, or is it just Krul’s personality?

We set off slowly but rapidly gained speed until we were moving at our usual pace—a moderate clip. After all, we were still in the middle of the city. The extra burden wasn’t giving us any problems yet, but the real test would be beyond the city.

At the gates, we bid goodbye to the guard on duty and emerged onto the main road. Rike flicked the reins, and Krul responded by picking up speed. Soon, we were flying down the road like we usually did. Everything seemed fine to me, but I checked with Rike—I figured, as the driver, she would know best.

“How is it going?” I asked.

“Krul’s happy as a clam.”

“If it’s necessary, the others and I could always get off and walk, so tell me if she gets tired.”

“Understood,” replied Rike.

Krul was hauling a definitively heavier load than usual. However, the regular amount of supplies never gave her any trouble, so I didn’t actually know where her limit was. If Krul was strong enough to haul a cart loaded with furniture and household goods, she’d be a major help in a crisis.

That being said, I didn’t plan to expose Krul to any unnecessary experiments.

For one, I feared that the wrath of Mama Diana could be scary...and more importantly, I didn't actually want to put Krul through that.

Frankly, in an emergency, our best bet was to just grab our money, jump on the cart, and make a run for it. Belongings were secondary. Other than Samya and Lidy, the others could return to their family homes without too much difficulty.

Or...was that naive of me to think?

We kept watch over our surroundings as we went.

According to Samya and Diana, the rainy season (or this world's equivalent) would start soon. The grass and wildflowers seemed to have already gotten the message—all around us, the plains were lush and verdant. Once the rains came, the plants would surely root even deeper into the soil and grow tall.

The grasses weren't yet high enough to hide a person, and that was helpful as we scanned the fields from the cart. By the time the rainy season was over, the plains might well turn into an emerald ocean that was deeper than a man was tall. That would make our trips a touch more difficult, since the tall vegetation could hide signs of incoming trouble and also impede any arrows we might fire.

Maybe I should make a few heavyweight arrows to have around...just in case.

As I was pondering that possibility, we made it back to the forest.

"Is Krul still doing okay?" I asked Rike.

Krul was the one who responded. She trilled loudly and happily, "*Kulu!*" and was clearly in high spirits. In fact, she was so cheerful that I was a little jealous.

"That's great. Keep it up."

"*Kulululu,*" she chirruped back.

Now that we were back in the forest, she'd dropped her speed but was still steadily striding along.

"We won't run into any bears, right?" I asked.

"Krul isn't showing signs of fear," Samya answered, "and I don't smell

anything either.”

The forest always felt safer to me than the road. On the road, we could run into anything at any time, but in the forest, all we had to be wary of were bears and tigers. Technically, the wild animals were more dangerous, but it was rare for us to come across any. Samya, a bona fide forest veteran, was with us too.

Our ride back was peaceful. The quiet was interrupted only by bird calls and the clattering of our cart.

When we arrived back at the cabin, we unhitched Krul from the cart and praised her for her hard work. Krul snorted in response, proud and content. After that, we shelved the various supplies—Krul even helped with that work. We brought the charcoal, ore, clay, seasoning, liquor, and seed potatoes into the respective storehouses.

Usually, after putting away the supplies, we would break off to spend the rest of the day as we liked. However, since we had just taken on a bulk order, I had us prioritize making molds and steel plates. An extra half day, short as it was, could make all the difference.

Samya, Diana, and Lidy made the molds; Rike and I made the plates. We worked side by side in silence until the sun set.

###

The next day, we got down to business—it was time to start on the bulk order. Unlike last time, we had to forge two different types of items, so division of labor was important. I planned on forging the spears alone, while everyone else worked on the swords.

Lidy was on mold-making duty, Samya and Diana were in charge of casting, and Rike was responsible for finishing the swords off and ensuring their quality.

We would use the first day to measure our production rate. From there, we could calculate our daily quota for the remaining six days.

Anyway, there was probably no need to stress—Rike and the others were aiming to forge five swords a day, and I had set a personal target of four spears. At those speeds, we should have no problem meeting our goal. Toward the end of the week, if needed, I could switch to helping Rike.

I heated a steel plate in the firebed until it was the right temperature to forge. Then, I transferred it to the anvil and shaped it with my hammer. The cross section of the speartip was to be a diamond shape. From tip to base, I shaped it to be a long isosceles triangle.

I'd designed the spear to be a thrusting weapon; though I sharpened the edges of the tip somewhat, it wouldn't be as sharp as a bladed weapon. The spear wouldn't be able to cut as well as, say, a knife, but in a pinch, it could be used to slice and dice.

After sharpening, I opened up a socket at the base of the tip where the haft would slot in. Last, I quenched and tempered the tip.

The design of the tip and the length of the spear were important traits for the weapon, but there was one more critical component: the end cap. I made a thick and solid cap with an open socket for the base of the haft.

This time around, I wasn't making elite models, but entry-level ones. That way, if worse came to worst and we started to run out of time, it'd be easier to come up with a last minute solution to compensate.

To make the hafts, I cut some thick planks of wood from our stockpile into bars. I then whittled those bars into cylindrical poles with my knife. Normally, it would be best to seal the wood with an oil, but I left the hafts naked.

I'll leave the maintenance up to the future owners. They can use whatever oil suits them best.

I slotted a finished haft into a speartip and hammered the base of the socket to crimp the two components together. Then, I did the same with an end cap.

At that, the spear was complete.

I repeated the same steps over and over again, and by the time the day was over, I'd hit my target, making five spears in total. At this speed, I would have no problem meeting the deadline.

Rike and the others had forged six swords in the span of the day, so they too had met their goal. All we had to do now was keep it up for the next week.

We passed the next day in the same fashion.

Come to think of it, my spearing-making efficiency has gone up. Before, it took my full focus to make four spears in a day.

Thankfully, I wasn't the type of person to get fatigued by repetitive work. Otherwise, I would've already gotten tired of forging the spears yesterday. That kind of easily bored personality would have been a major hindrance to my blacksmithing ambitions.

Well, I suppose I chose this trade precisely because I didn't mind a little bit of repetition...

Those were the thoughts running through my head as I brought my hammer down on the glowing hot piece of metal that was to be my third or fourth spear of the day.

Chapter 6: A Revolution Brewing in the Empire

For the next six days, we buckled down and forged the swords and spears for the order. We never wavered from our mission and successfully hit our target. There was even a tiny amount of time to spare which we used to plant the seed potatoes in the field.

On the delivery day, we loaded everything up and hitched Krul to the cart. The swords were one thing, but the large numbers of spears, long as they were, were bulky and tough to tie together.

Once we finished our preparations, we hit the road. The rainy season was approaching, but you never would've guessed it from the weather—the air in the forest was clean and fresh.

We had next to zero reasons to worry about a tiger attack, but we nonetheless proceeded with caution. After all, bears liked to roam around this area too. But at the same time, I didn't think we needed to be overly vigilant since a few members of our party had excellent senses of smell.

We passed through without incident and emerged onto the road. As in the forest, there were no signs of the impending rains here. The sky was clear and blue and the plains vibrant. The grass stood tall and proud as if looking forward to rain. If I hadn't been in a new world, I would've been tempted to relax and enjoy the beautiful day.

However, the kingdom I now lived in was far from being as safe and stable as Japan had been. Regardless of how idyllic the scenery appeared, it was dangerous to let down our guards. We had come prepared with bows and throwing spears, but ideally we wouldn't have to use them.

Once in a while, we'd hear a rustle come from a patch of grass nearby and we would all perk up at the same time. However, the culprit always turned out to be a rabbit or other small critter. Since there wasn't any reason to come all the way out here to hunt (there was plenty of game for us in the forest), I hadn't ever seen the animals that lived in the grasslands.

After several false alarms, we arrived at the city. We exchanged greetings with the guard at the gate, who was carrying a halberd. One of these days, I wanted to ask how the guards were getting used to the new weapons. I could probably find out through Marius.

Up until now, we had been attracting a significant amount of attention in the streets of the city, but today we were largely ignored. There was only the occasional surprised stare from travelers—be they human, beastfolk, or dwarf—visiting from elsewhere.

When we arrived at Camilo's store, we headed up to the conference room. Camilo came to meet us surprisingly quickly today—he must've known there was a good chance we would show up around this time.

"Hey! How go the sales?" I asked him.

"They're going," Camilo replied. "Can't complain."

After some brief small talk, we jumped into the main topic of the day.

"Did you finish the order?" he asked.

"Who do you think I am?" I teased.

"I knew I could count on you. You're a big help."

I smirked. "It is my job, you know?"

Camilo shot me a grin back. He then signaled the head clerk, who nodded and left the room.

"Now, about the rebellion," he said once the clerk had departed, "there's been a bit of a hiccup. It shouldn't have any effect on the uprising itself, but..."

"A hiccup?"

He nodded. "Yeah. There has been some unusual activity from the empire's military, but as of yet, there aren't any foreseeable problems."

"Was information about the dissidents leaked?"

He nodded again. "The leaders of the empire aren't idiots—they have spies in their employ. Any movement is bound to raise at least some degree of suspicion."

“I see...”

“Like I said before, it shouldn’t affect the actual revolution in any way. The problem is...”

He paused for a long moment.

“Helen’s...been captured by the empire.”

“Helen?!” I blurted out, unable to hide my surprise. She was miles above me in terms of strength, *and* she wielded a pair of my custom model dual blades. I found it hard to believe that she would lose to some common soldiers.

“I don’t know much about the details,” said Camilo.

“There’s no way she lost in a normal fight,” I pointed out

“Not against a small group. But if she were up against a large number of enemies...I don’t know.”

“Right...”

Even a legendary hero who could take down a thousand warriors would find it hard to win against an army of ten thousand. Had that been the situation that Helen had found herself in?

But, there were flaws with that theory.

“A unit large enough to capture a fighter of her caliber would have been conspicuous,” Camilo reasoned, “but I’m not aware of any military presence along those lines.”

That was right—Camilo was a man who had ferreted out news about the brewing revolution. Had there been a large fight, he would’ve known about it.

“Do you think it was done in secret?” I asked.

“Maybe. Or there were extenuating circumstances.”

“Hmmm, okay.” I folded my arms to think. Though I might’ve been a guest to this world, I’d gotten to know a good number of its residents. I wanted to do something to help, but I had to keep in mind that I was supposed to be a run-of-the-mill blacksmith.

Camilo leaned in closer. “The reason I’m telling you this is because we’ve

received an order from the margrave. He requested that I sneak a person into the empire to help extricate her...someone who wouldn't arouse suspicion. And there was only one person who I could think of that fit that description."

"And...that's me."

He nodded. "I know it's strange to ask this of a blacksmith, but out of everyone I know, you're the only one who has enough combat ability for the mission. And, on top of that, you work in a trade that doesn't normally require you to travel."

"I see."

So, it seemed that the remaining question was whether I would accept the job or not. I glanced at my family. They all wore the same expression, one that said, "We already know you're going to agree."

Rude! Every last one of them.

"Okay, I'll do it," I replied with a sigh.

"Thanks. Sorry to ask you time and time again."

"It's fine. It's my job... Well, not really, but Helen's hardly a stranger."

That—on top of the fact that the request came from the margrave himself—meant it wasn't one Camilo could lightly refuse. At this point, I might as well accept the fact that my secret was out of the bag for good; the margrave might not know *exactly* how far my skills stretched, but he had surely caught on to the fact that I was not, in fact, a normal blacksmith.

It was what it was. Going forward, I'd take it as a given that he'd seen through me...and use that knowledge to my advantage the best I can.

Next, Camilo briefed me on our travel plans. Obviously, the sooner we left the better, and we decided to head out early the next morning. My cover was as a blacksmith in a merchant's retinue hired to handle repairs. To back up my story, I would need a simple, portable furnace. Camilo promised to procure one for me. He was also arranging the horses and carriage. We agreed to rendezvous at the edge of the forest, the same as when he'd taken me to the capital.

We would talk about the details on the way there. Apparently, he already had a rough guess as to where Helen was being detained, but we would have to find the exact location. After which, we would be better positioned to flesh out the rescue plan.

We wrapped up our discussion there. The others and I packed up quickly and left.

Busy days loomed on the horizon, though they would have nothing to do with my primary work.

We departed from the city right after leaving Camilo's shop. Though we kept an eye out while we were on the road, we prioritized speed above all else. It was the same once we returned to the forest.

However, traveling through the forest at our top speed would have made for a...bumpy ride, to say the least. The baggage would have been thrown around, and it would have been unpleasant for us riders as well. So, among the trees, we dropped our speed slightly while still going as fast as was comfortable. However, we certainly broke the record for how fast we'd ever ridden through the Black Forest.

When we got home, we put away all the supplies and thanked Krul for her hard work. She chirruped brightly back, "*Kulululu*." Despite the fact that she had been all-out sprinting, she didn't look exhausted in the least.

Lidy had told me that Krul metabolized magic as a source of energy, so that might've had something to do with her boundless stamina.

My curiosity on the matter was far from quenched, but I didn't have time to put that hypothesis to the test. After all, I was leaving tomorrow morning, and I had to prepare.

I scrambled back to the cabin.

For food—a critical part of any traveler's inventory—I prepared a large supply of boar jerky, cut into strips. Into my rucksack, I also packed swathes of cloth as a substitute for bandages, the same as I had for the military expedition.

"What else do I need?" I mused.

“You’ll be traveling as a blacksmith, right, Boss?” Rike asked. “What about tools and equipment?”

“That’s a good point.”

I chose to bring my favorite hammer and a few plates of metal from our stash, and I stacked those in a box.

As far as preparations go, that should be enough.

“As you all already know, I will be away again,” I announced to everyone after I’d brought out dinner. “This time, I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. I might be back in a week, or I might be away for a month. Though, I can’t imagine it’ll take longer than a month.”

The revolution would surely have begun by the time a month had passed. And once it was underway, Helen’s survival would become highly suspect. Therefore, one month was around the time limit for our mission.

“Is there anything you are worried about?” I asked. “If there are any provisions you need, I can let Camilo know and have him deliver them to the forest entrance.”

The others pondered my words.

Samya was the first to answer. “We have enough meat to last, I think.”

Lidy followed up. “I know which forest plants are edible, and we have the field too.”

“If I *had* to say,” Rike pondered, “I’m most worried about the ore and charcoal, but the amount in the shed should get us through a month.”

We usually bought more supplies from Camilo than we could use in a two-week period, so we currently had a generous surplus—that’d apparently been a good call. Plus, the sheds were already proving their worth, even though it hadn’t been long since we’d finished building them.

Diana gave her opinion last. “We can handle any repairs around the house, so we should be fine, no?”

With everyone’s input considered, so concluded the deliberation.

“It sounds like you have it all sorted,” I said.

“Actually, we’re most worried about you,” Diana replied. “You take on requests left and right, even when they have nothing to do with your actual work. And you came home injured last time, right?”

I had no excuses to defend myself with, and instead simply wilted in response. Lidy, who was one of the reasons why I’d been in the line of danger, drooped a bit as well.

“Oh! It’s not your fault at all, Lidy,” Diana hurriedly blurted out. “I’m just trying to say that Eizo should take better care of himself.”

Samya and Rike nodded vehemently.

Diana continued. “It’s your decision, and we’re not going to stop you. But remember that we, as your family, are waiting for you to come back safe and sound.”

I looked around at their worried faces. Though I wanted to say something to put them at ease, I found myself choked up. It took a moment, but I eventually reined in my emotions and, in the end, I could only smile and promise, “I’ll remember.”

I meant it from the bottom of my heart.

###

The next morning I said my prayers, took my bags and the goddess figure I’d carved (slipped into my chest pocket), and set off. Everyone was coming with me to the forest’s entrance, so we took the cart as usual, with Krul in the lead.

At the boundary of the forest we chose a spot among the trees to wait, one where we still had a good view of the road. I’d been told that we were heading into the rainy season, and off in the distance I spied a layer of clouds hanging heavy.

Occasionally, horse-drawn carriages—which looked like merchant caravans, ranks of soldiers, and travelers on foot—passed by on the way to their destinations. It made sense to take long-distance journeys before the storms began and take advantage of the lull before the rainy season. Once the rains

came, the road would turn muddy, making it much harder to traverse.

After a while, a carriage traveling faster than the previous ones came flying down the road and came to a stop next to the forest. If the riders were looking to make repairs or take a break, they would've instead pulled up next to the open plains where it was relatively safe. The fact that they had purposefully stopped next to the forest meant that...

I grabbed my bags and stalked closer to the carriage. When I drew near, I called out, "Camilo!"

His familiar face peered down at me from the carriage. "Hey, you're here."

"Yeah," I said. "Give me a hand."

I handed him the box with the metal plates, and he lifted it into the cart. Then, I climbed into the back with him.

We decided to depart right away while there weren't any other travelers around. I stood up facing the forest and waved. Once I saw my family wave back, I sat back down.

We immediately got moving.

It wasn't long before I noticed something unusual.

"Could there be...a suspension system built into this cart?" I mused.

I hadn't gotten a close look earlier, though it was also possible that the system was camouflaged so that the mechanism wouldn't stand out at just a glance.

"Yeah, we finally got something working," Camilo confirmed. "Mass production is still out of reach, so we hid the system to prevent others from copying our design."

I'd mostly been talking to myself, but Camilo answered my question anyway. The carriage still rocked from side to side, but it rarely jolted or jumped the way it had on our last journey.

"If the wagons we'd ridden in during the monster cleanup campaign had come with suspensions installed, my hips would've been spared some pain."

“I plan to start selling these soon, so next time you might get lucky. If there is a next time, that is...”

“I, for one, am praying that there isn’t.”

“Can’t blame you for that.” Camilo laughed, and I joined in.

Dealing with a monster outbreak wasn’t something I wanted to do very often. After all, I was just an ordinary blacksmith.

We flew down the city road at a speed that would’ve been impossible for a normal carriage loaded down with luggage.

“At this pace, we’ll reach the border sooner than I expected. It’s still a multi-day journey, though,” Camilo informed me. “Let’s use this time to talk through the details.”

“Sure,” I said. “I also wanted to know why the margrave came to you with this request.”

“Ah, that’s easy—the margrave was the one who originally sent Helen to the empire.”

“He must be a highly principled man to orchestrate a rescue for a simple mercenary rather than abandoning her.”

“You...could say that.” His tone implied there was something more to the story, something that it was better for me not to know (otherwise he would’ve said it).

I sat back in my seat and changed the topic. “What kind of place is the empire?”

“For one, they have an emperor rather than a king,” Camilo answered. “Otherwise, it’s not much different from here. Their lifestyles are similar. The architecture too.”

“Is that so?”

I had been expecting an empire to be characterized by impressive military strongholds, but I suppose the only real answer to “what’s the difference between a kingdom and an empire?” was who sat at the top—the leader’s authority was pretty much the same in both countries.

“That’s how it is,” Camilo said. “Though, the nobility have less power there. It’s more or less an autocracy.”

Here in the kingdom, there was a parliament comprising the nobility where decisions pertaining to the state were decided through debate and discussion. Ultimately, the king (and the royal family) had the final say, so when all was said and done, the kingdom was a monarchy.

However, the king couldn’t veto the parliament’s decisions willy-nilly without risking the nobility’s ire, which could lead to the birth of dissidents and defectors. The king, at the end of the day, was nothing more than the leader of the knights. Therefore, the parliament’s decisions were usually adopted as long as they weren’t blatantly unfavorable to the royal family.

By contrast, the empire apparently operated solely on the emperor’s proclamations. An assembly of nobles existed, but it served more in an advisory capacity than as a legislature. The nobles gave their opinions on the emperor’s rulings before his decisions were made public, but it was up to the emperor whether or not to adopt their ideas.

If the emperor wasn’t in the mood to sit through every opinion, he would announce his decisions as they were. These off-the-cuff rulings were far from rare events, or so I learned.

With a competent emperor at the reins, the empire developed rapidly. Any proclamations were enacted almost immediately at a pace that was normally unimaginable.

Be that as it may, the fact that a revolution was in the works likely implied that the current emperor was not an adept leader.

“If a rebellion is underway, does that mean the people are discontent with the emperor?” I asked.

“It would seem so. Taxes have been high these past few years. That alone isn’t reason enough for people to rebel, but it seems to have been one of the seeds. That and the rumor that the people’s taxes have been pocketed by the nobility.”

It must’ve been infuriating to see one’s hard-earned money used to line the

pockets of the rich. If I remembered correctly, the French Revolution had started for similar reasons.

“People truly at the end of their rope used to escape here to the kingdom. But when travel restrictions were enacted, it became impossible to run. That was the final straw.”

“I understand now.”

When people were pushed to the brink, there were always those who would seek change to better their conditions. I was fortunate to have never experienced that level of suffering either in this world or my previous world, but it wasn't difficult to imagine their feelings.

“How are we getting around the travel restrictions?” I asked.

“The restrictions only affect the empire's populace. Pilgrims, travelers, and merchants are exempt, so our visit is entirely above board. Admittedly, though, it wasn't cheap to procure the right of passage.”

Camilo removed a wooden plate from his pocket to show me. Like he had said, the writing on the plate said something about how we were permitted entry to the empire. With it, we likely wouldn't run into any problems on the road.

“So we should be fine as long as we keep a lid on our true motives,” I concluded.

“You got it,” Camilo said with a wink.

No matter how many times I saw it, that expression just didn't look right on him...

As I collected my thoughts, I gazed out at the scenery.

We had to gather information, so this mission was going to be different from anything I'd done before. That being said, it seemed like we already had an idea of where Helen had been taken.

When I asked, Camilo told me, “She's being held in a trade town.”

“Not a military base?”

“No.”

I had thought a military base would be the perfect place to confine a mercenary, but it seemed like that wasn't the case.

“A lot of traffic passes through the town, so it's easy to hide a single mercenary,” Camilo explained. “I'm sure there's no shortage of storehouses they could keep her in.”

“Which means that there's a reason the empire wants to keep Helen's capture a secret...”

“Yeah, that's likely,” replied Camilo. “And if that's the case, taking her back should be easy—as the official record goes, they never captured her to begin with. I doubt they're keeping her in a proper prison complex, and they aren't likely to be mistreating her either, at least until the order is given to kill her and bury the whole thing.”

“And the order could be issued at any moment.”

“Yeah.”

Our hasty departure told me that time was of the essence. I don't know when the margrave had given Camilo the mission, but I hadn't even had a full day to sit with the news before we'd departed.

Along the road, we hammered out the details one by one. Luckily, since we were riding in a horse-drawn carriage, we didn't have to worry about any eavesdroppers.

“Once we find her, what do I do?” I asked.

“Sorry to put this on you, but you're our fighter,” Camilo answered. “Once we're on the run, it'll be a different story. There's a chance you'll have to do some role-playing.”

No one would expect a geezer like me to know how to swing a sword, so it was easy for me to fly under the radar. I was fine with that.

It was the second half of Camilo's plan that I was curious about.

“Role-play?” I asked.

“We’re too conspicuous as a pack, but alone, you look like a normal middle-aged man from head to toe. We have the option of passing you and Helen off as a couple—we can sneak you out that way.”

“A couple? That’s not believable,” I protested.

“Why not? I’d believe it. Women don’t queue up at a blacksmith’s door usually, and Helen has that scar across her face. It’s not so strange for the two of you to end up married.”

“Hmmm.”

“Between Helen’s red hair and her scar, she’ll be recognized in a heartbeat. We’ll have to find a wig for her. Fortunately, if her capture has been kept hushed, then the town guards wouldn’t have gotten the info on what she looks like, at least not in any detail. That’ll work to our benefit.”

“Makes sense.”

The more people were involved in a plot, the higher the chance of information leaking. Take, for instance, proprietresses of inns and the like. The stereotype was that they were loose-lipped, but the origins of that stereotype weren’t anything malicious—proprietresses just came into contact with a large number of people and had little reason to keep what they knew a secret.

Guards, on the other hand, knew the importance of discretion, but not everyone abided by the same strict standards for what was considered confidential. Even I had benefited from that fact. Guards had told me useful information in the past. It was all out of kindness, so I didn’t think badly of them for it.

Camilo and I continued to chat on the subject as we rode onwards to the empire. We didn’t run into any bandits either, which could’ve been because we were still in the kingdom’s territory.

The first night, we stayed in a town close to the kingdom’s border. A lot of travelers passed through this town because of its location, and there was an official military garrison as well.

The town also saw a lot of merchants, so we easily found lodging. Camilo and

I rented two rooms, and the coachman borrowed bedding from the inn to sleep in the cart. He would be on guard duty as well. Apparently, that was the typical routine for a coachman.

The room I was staying in was nothing special. In fact, it wasn't that different from my bedroom at home. Had it been particularly luxurious or shoddy, I might've had more to say, but there was little to distinguish one mediocre room from another.

After we finished dinner in the great hall of our lodgings, Camilo announced, "Let's hit the town!"

"Where?" I asked.

It was already dark out, and it was too late to do anything.

"It's time for us to do some snooping," he clarified.

"Okay, but where?"

I was all for doing some digging around, but the farmers and townspeople would've long since gone home, and all the shops were closed. There was no one to probe for information...or was there?

"You're talking about going to a brothel," I said.

"Clever, clever," he teased. "You're coming with me, right?"

The only places open at this time of night were pubs and brothels. If we had more time to spend in this town, we could have trawled the pubs over several nights, but since we were leaving tomorrow morning, we only had one. It would've been too obvious if we went around to a bunch of taverns asking about the same topic. Someone would figure out our goals.

So rather than asking a lot of people, it was better to ask one person who was positioned to see and hear a lot. Someone who could keep their mouth shut. It could hardly be called suspicious to ask someone a few questions.

Of course, we ran the risk of picking someone who didn't know anything, and there was no guarantee the conversation wouldn't get leaked anyway. In any case, our goal for today wasn't a full-on investigation so much as light reconnaissance.

“I’m not going,” I told Camilo.

“Why not? Afraid you won’t be able to face your wives after?” he joked.

“No. They’re my family, but not...” I trailed off.

There weren’t any laws against polygamy in this world. As far as the cultural norms and customs here went, there weren’t any problems with me marrying all of them. That wasn’t why I hadn’t taken that step.

“There’s less of a chance of the night being a total bust if we both go,” Camilo said.

“Won’t it be suspicious for us to ask two different people the exact same questions?” I deflected.

“Th-That’s...”

I had no desire to join Camilo at the brothel, the number one reason being that I wanted to avoid any chance of continuing my bloodline. Above all else, I was a guest here. It was unlikely that contraceptive surgeries were available in this world, so I had to take precautions just in case.

For that same reason, I didn’t plan to marry the women in my family or have any children. Fortunately, the women didn’t seem to want to pursue anything of the sort either, so there was no need to upset the current dynamic.

However, I couldn’t share my reasoning with people, so I had no choice but to dodge the question with excuses. This time, I was able to duck the issue, but I figured I should prepare some other explanations to keep ready in my back pocket.

“Besides,” I added, “I have shoddy conversational skills. You’re the smooth talker here. I’ll leave the digging to the pros.”

“Fine, I get it...” Camilo relented.

I walked with Camilo out of the great room. He swanned out, half nervous and sweating, half buoyant at the prospect of his task ahead.

###

The next day was another early morning for us. I woke around the same time

as the coachman, and the two of us ate together. Around us, other travelers were breaking fast or rushing off to their next destination, in a hurry to be on the road, just like us.

Camilo returned while we were eating. His expression was inscrutable. He looked neither particularly refreshed nor weary.

“How did it go?” I asked him. Needless to say, I wasn’t talking about the brothel.

“Well enough. I was able to obtain some proof for my theory, so now I’m positive which town they’re holding her in,” Camilo explained.

“Isn’t that good news?”

“Except...”

“Except what?”

Camilo leaned closer to me and lowered his voice. “I also learned that the rebellion may break out earlier than expected.”

“That’s certainly a problem...” I said.

“I’ll tell you the rest once we’re on the road,” he promised.

“Okay.”

Camilo shoveled down his meal and the three of us left together. We had ridden into town just before sunset yesterday, and I hadn’t gotten a good look at our surroundings. In the light of the day, I could see a mountain range rising in the distance, which demarcated the border between the kingdom and the empire.

We got into the carriage and departed from the town, riding down the sole road in the area that led to the border. The branches in the road grew less frequent as we drew closer and closer to the mountains. It looked like the town we’d stayed in last night served as a sort of outpost.

It wasn’t long before we arrived at the foot of the mountain range. The border was marked with a wooden fence and fortified with an abatis, which were rows of sharpened log pikes. There was a fort stationed right next to the border, and I could tell that it allowed a commanding view of the area. Guards

carrying bows stood on what looked to be an observation platform. Horses were also tied up outside the fort, and they were likely used to give chase in an emergency situation or to dispatch messages.

The line of the fence was interrupted by a plain wooden gate with a roof pitched over the top. It looked like the *kansho* inspection stations featured in period dramas from my previous world. Granted, it didn't just *look* like one—most likely, it served the same function as well.

The difference between the checkpoint in front of me and the ones I was remembering was that the soldiers stationed here were heavily armed.

Flags swelled and billowed in the wind near the fort and the gate. They were decorated with what I was guessing was the empire's crest.

A line of people waited in front of the gate to be inspected. Normally, there should have been an equally long line of people on the other side of the gate, but there were hardly any people traveling into the kingdom from the empire. It seemed that the rumors were true and that the empire's citizens weren't allowed to leave.

The guards on the other side were checking travelers' belongings and carriages carefully to catch any stowaways, so the inspections were taking a long time.

We were going to have to pass through this waypoint on the way home, but none of us—not Camilo, not me, not the coachman, and not Helen—were citizens of the empire, so we figured that we should be fine. I had my fingers crossed that both border trips would go smoothly.

We joined the line of people entering the empire. The queue moved forward slowly but surely, and soon it was our turn at the gate.

"State the purpose of your visit," the soldier said.

"I am a traveling merchant," Camilo replied. "I'll be making the rounds to different towns to peddle my goods. Here is the proof of my authorization." He removed the wooden plate from his chest pocket and handed it over.

The soldier scanned the words written on it and returned it with a nod.

Then, he turned to me. “And you?”

“I’m Yoshimitsu, a blacksmith from the north. I’m accompanying this gentleman to repair sickles, hoes, and other goods,” I answered.

“Those are examples of my wares,” Camilo explained.

Camilo had briefed me before, telling me that a simple explanation would be enough. This was my first time experiencing something like this. Even in my previous world, I had never traveled abroad.

We had prepared a fake name for me just in case. That said, there weren’t any family registers or official lists used in the kingdom, and even if there had been, my name wouldn’t have been listed anyway. The fake name was really nothing more than a precaution.

The soldier remained stoic and silently scrutinized my face.

I smiled politely, but it was far from a graceful smile.

Finally, the soldier relented. “All right, go on through.”

Relief washed over me as I tipped my head at the soldier.

We rode our cart through the gates.

“Man, that gave me chills,” I said.

“This is the only maintained road into the empire. Since the border is so close to the mountains, checkpoints are rare,” Camilo told me.

“Really?”

“Think about it. What’s the purpose of the walls and gates around towns?”

“I see what you’re saying.”

While the station was connected to a fence, its function as an inspection point was only secondary. Its real purpose was to act as a bottleneck. If the empire suspected an invasion by the kingdom was imminent, they would buy time by restricting access to the empire and send a fast rider to call for reinforcements. While waiting for backup, they would hold down the fort for as long as possible.

Of course, it wasn’t impossible to take a detour—a long one—around the fort. Crossing through the mountains was more dangerous, but the risk could be

worth the benefit of bypassing the checkpoint into the empire (or the kingdom). I wondered if there were people who had tried to cross the border that way and what their journey had been like, but there was no way to know.

Once we were alone on the road, I turned to Camilo and asked, “Well? Are you going to tell me how it went?”

“According to the little miss at the brothel, a large number of merchants like me passed through town several days ago.”

“Which led to the discussion that the revolutionary forces were going to make their move soon?”

“Yeah.”

“Won’t the empire be suspicious if a large amount of weapons suddenly show up in the country?”

“That’s certainly something to consider... But the dissidents still have the element of surprise as long as they strike before the empire finishes its investigation.”

“Oh, now I get it.”

I knew little about strategy and politics. Even in my previous life, I had been far from the power-hungry, ambitious type. Maybe I should have at least read a manga about a corporate manager reborn as the captain of an order of knights.

“Now that I can confidently declare which town is our target, I want to head straight there tonight without going to the town we were originally supposed to stay in,” Camilo explained. “We’ll stop to rest, of course, but we’ll have to camp instead. Sorry about this.”

“Got it,” I replied.

“Thanks.”

Camilo signaled the coachman, who nodded his understanding. With a lash of the whip, he urged the horses faster. With the suspensions installed, a little speed wasn’t going to hurt the carriage. We continued down the road at a brisk pace.

We flew along faster than a normal carriage would have been able to, and the scenery flowed around us. Whenever we passed or caught up to other carriages and travelers, we slowed down slightly so that no one would find out about the suspensions, and by slightly, I mean, *slightly*. It still felt like we were racing ahead.

It was unhealthy for the horses to sustain a gallop at top speed. After all, horses were different from drakes, who practically had inexhaustible energy as long as they had a continuous magical supply.

We took the occasional break to give the horses water, salt, and food. The three of us would eat a snack of packaged food and quench our thirst.

Even factoring in the breaks, we were traveling at a good pace. “I made the right decision having you tell me about the you-know-whats,” Camilo told me.

We had passed the mountains by midday, and they had now faded behind us into the distance. Grassy plains spread out around us in all directions, making for a rather lonely scenery.

The grass here didn’t grow as thickly as it did in the kingdom. Instead, the terrain was more rocky, and larger stones rolled under us as we went. I couldn’t get off the carriage to get a good look, but it seemed that the plants and vegetation were different here too.

When things settled down, I would love to come back for a leisurely vacation...and if that time came, hopefully the border crossing would go just as smoothly.

When the sun was about to set, we stopped to set up camp. We had refilled our cask of water along the way, so all we had to do was build a fire. Since we didn’t have any tents, the plan was to make do with a blanket and sleep on the ground.

Dinner was a soup made from heated packaged jerky and beans. It was a simple dish, but it was a massive improvement from eating provisions straight out of the package like we’d done during our breaks. Camilo, the coachman, and I took our time eating. Over dinner, we decided that we would take turns keeping watch during the night.

I was shaken awake in the middle of the night.

It was the coachman. "Your turn," he said.

"Okay, I got it."

Since the coachman had to steer tomorrow, we had him take the first watch. After his shift, he could rest uninterrupted until morning.

"I brewed some tea," he told me.

"Thanks. I appreciate it," I said. "Good night."

"No problem. Good night."

With my blanket still draped over my shoulders, I grabbed my spear and went to stand watch. My night vision was poor—perhaps because of the contrast between the light of the campfire and the encroaching darkness—but the full moon cast a gentle light over our surroundings.

In the Black Forest, it was hard to see the moon, and when I had tagged along on the military expedition, we'd always returned to our tents immediately when the day was over. This was the first time since coming to this world that I'd been able to stare at the moon at my leisure.

There were no craters on this moon's surface, and there was a blue tint to its light which reminded me that I was in a different world, for better or for worse. Nevertheless, the beauty of the moon was a fact unchanged across worlds.

According to my installed data, the moon here didn't glow because it was reflecting the light from the sun, but rather because of the blessings of the moon goddess. The data didn't come with information about the material composition of the moon, so I didn't know much in detail. Apparently, the sun also gave off light because of the sun god's favor. None of my knowledge from my previous world was applicable in this instance.

It was common sense in this world that the sun god and the moon goddess rained their blessings down on the world, and the cycles of both celestial bodies were rooted in this splendid myth.

There were four seasons in this world because the sun god had a leisurely personality. His joy burned high and bright during spring and summer. Winter

came when he finally tired—that was the season when he rested and rekindled his energy for the next spring.

There was a similar explanation for the waxing and waning of the moon. Unlike the sun god, the moon goddess had a quick temper, which was why the moon's cycle lasted only a month.

Bathed in the glow of the impetuous moon goddess's blessing, I cast my gaze out over the grassy plains, occasionally remembering to throw more kindling on the fire. Once in a while, the howl of a wild animal would make my blood run cold, but the sounds never drew close.

My shift was quiet, and the night passed uneventfully. When it was time, I boiled water over the fire to steep some tea and then roused Camilo.

"It's time to rotate," I said.

Surprisingly, Camilo roused immediately from his dead sleep. "Okay."

"You wake up fast," I commented.

"I was a peddler for a long time. I learned to fall asleep and wake up at the drop of a hat."

"Handy."

This obviously wasn't his first or second time on night duty. He was a veteran.

"Here. Tea." I handed the cup over to Camilo.

"Thanks. G'night."

"G'night."

I wrapped myself up in my blanket and lay down to get a few more hours of shut-eye before we had to be moving again.

###

The next morning, I got up before anyone came to wake me. Camilo and the coachman were already awake too, though in Camilo's case, he'd been awake ever since the start of his turn at the watch.

"You're awake. Morning," Camilo said.

“Good morning,” the coachman added.

I greeted them both in turn.

As we packed up and prepared to hit the road, Camilo told me, “Thanks to the leaf spring mechanism you showed me, it looks like we’ll reach town today.”

“That’s exactly what it’s meant for,” I replied.

The coachman commented, “The ride was smooth, especially for the pace we were traveling.”

I couldn’t deny that I had minutely sped up the progress needle of civilization. The invention of the suspensions was likely to have a ripple effect on this world.

The leaf springs were a simple construction in and of itself, so sooner or later someone like Da Vinci would have come along and had a breakthrough. Really, it would’ve just been a matter of time before someone invented them.

Once we finished our preparations, we got into the carriage and departed. Like yesterday, we slowed down around other people (and carriages) but otherwise kept a fast pace.

On occasion, rocky mountains rose up to break up the horizon. When I asked Camilo, he said that the empire had more mines than the kingdom did.

Maybe Rike had even originally come from the empire.

The scenery around us was somewhat dreary. There were areas where the grass grew wild that could have been used as farmland, but there were no signs that anyone lived around here.

Back in the kingdom, there were also large swathes of grassy plains. Apparently, the farmlands around the cities and capital produced enough food, so there was no reason to cultivate anything farther out. The lack of habitation around here made sense when I considered that the same reason could apply to the empire.

In the middle of the day, we stopped to give the horses a break.

“Speed is all well and good, but the faster pace is a strain on horses,” Camilo said while wiping his face using the water we’d collected.

“Horses have their limits too,” I responded.

“I wish there were horses that never tired and could keep on going as long as you kept them fed.”

“If there were, merchants would take full advantage of them.”

“Of course.”

Camilo was describing something close to a drake. However, it wasn't commonly known that drakes could be sustained with magical energy.

That information was only privy to the elves...and maybe a few members of the royal family as well. I could at least say for sure that it wasn't the kind of information the daughter of a count was privy to. In any case, the knowledge was meaningless unless one had a reliable supply of magic.

Camilo's dream could be realized if someone invented a tool that could be used as a steady source of magic. Alternatively, the development of a steam engine and eventually an internal combustion engine would serve them well. However, I had no intention of inventing anything of the sort.

Thinking about the historical timeline in my previous world, I figured that, in this age, I might live to see the seeds of invention planted, but it was unlikely I would see them come to fruition.

After our break, we returned to the road. Around two hours before sunset, the number of carriages around us started to increase.

“Are we almost there?” I asked Camilo.

“Yeah,” he said. “You can see the town off in the distance.”

I looked to where he was pointing and saw a collection of buildings encircled by a wall.

That was where Helen was being held.

Unconsciously, I tightened my grip on the box rim of the cart.

Chapter 7: Rescue Mission

There was a line of waiting carriages, and our coachman pulled up and took his place at the end. As we slowly moved forward in the queue, new carriages were constantly coming up behind us, so the line never shortened, not even a little. Young girls and boys weaved among the waiting carriages, peddling food and flowers.

I called out to a boy wearing a cap. “I’ll take some of those, lad!” I handed him five silver coins in exchange for three mikan-like fruits.

According to Camilo, the market price of mikans was one silver coin apiece. In other words, three of them should’ve cost three silver coins—I’d paid two extra.

“Thank you for your business, sir,” the child said, bowing his head.

I waved back.

Then, he continued, “But...I’m a girl.”

That declaration took me aback, and I peered closer.

The child removed her cap, revealing short hair but also a pair of big, bright eyes. There was no doubt that the child before me was a cute, young girl.

“My bad,” I said with an awkward smile. I took another silver piece from my pocket and tossed it to her.

She caught it with her hat. “Thanks, sir.” She then slipped her hat back on and left to sell her wares to other travelers.

I gave Camilo and the coachman each a mikan. The fruit tasted similar to oranges but slightly more sour. Citrus fruits were supposed to be tart anyway, so I found the mikan plenty delicious.

I side-eyed Camilo, and he returned my look with an exasperated expression. However, he quickly nodded in agreement and we formed an unspoken understanding—if he could find a supplier of mikans, he would procure some for me.

At last, we moved to the front of the line, where there was a checkpoint right in front of the town gate. An armor-clad guard carrying a shortspear approached us. Camilo took out the wooden plate—the one that granted us the right to travel in the empire—and displayed it.

The guard looked at it and then turned to me. “What about you?” he asked.

“I’m a blacksmith working with this gentleman,” I answered. “He sells the items I forge.”

The guard looked me up and down. Whichever way you cut it, appearance-wise, I was your stereotypical man in his thirties (though inside, I was over forty).

Finally, with a wave of his hand, the guard said, “Go on through.”

The three of us gave our thanks and rode past him.

“That’s the first hurdle cleared,” I whispered to Camilo.

“Once we’re inside, it’s all up to us,” he replied.

I looked up at the wall and gate looming before us. I’m sure guards were patrolling the streets, but in a town this size, one or two people could get away with sneaking around...to say nothing of a “regular” merchant and his companions.

The guard at the gate had only checked us cursorily, even though we were from the same kingdom as Helen (a deducible fact). This led me to conclude that the news about Helen hadn’t been made public, which was as we’d expected.

Of course, we couldn’t discount the possibility that the guard had only been feigning negligence. If that were the case, we could only say that we were unlucky.

“I want to start our investigation as soon as possible,” I told Camilo. It was time to begin cementing our plan for locating and rescuing Helen.

“Agreed. Today would be ideal,” Camilo responded. “We can ask around while we sell goods. It’ll make a good cover.”

“And after tomorrow?”

“Once we have proof, we act. I want to set our goals today at least. The opposition should have their plates full right now, so I doubt they’ve hidden their tracks very thoroughly,” he explained. “Anyway, for the time being, let’s head to the inn and catch our breath.”

I took in the sights of the town as we rode through it. Members from all different races mingled on the lively streets. As a trade hub, this town attracted people from all over, and the diversity fueled its energy.

I wondered what a normal town or village was like in the empire. Would they be sleepy and peaceful?

Rescuing Helen was our top priority. My part wouldn’t come until later in the mission, but I couldn’t take it easy—I had to focus.

I shored up my resolve as we headed into the heart of town.

We rode slowly through the hustle and bustle, and before long, we arrived at our inn. It was a large establishment with a grand facade.

Camilo informed the clerks that we would be staying for a week, and he secured us three rooms—this time, the coachman would be staying with us. Camilo paid extra to have the inn workers look after our carriage and luggage.

Apparently, the coachman wasn’t *just* a coachman. It seemed that he also had experience in reconnaissance.

We brought the belongings we would need for our stay into our separate rooms and then convened in Camilo’s room.

“This is quite a fancy place you’ve booked for us,” I commented.

“We’ll be looked down on if we don’t secure respectable lodgings, which would make it difficult to gather any info of substance,” Camilo explained.

“I see.”

“My choice is related to our fact-finding mission as well.”

“How so?”

“We’re here to look for info on storehouses, so we need to demonstrate a certain level of wealth,” he said. “Eizo, you and I will set up shop in the Open Market. You know without me saying what our real mission is, but you also know our cover story, correct?”

I nodded. “We are hoping to open a store in town. Know any storage places we can use?” I rattled off. “Something to that effect, right?”

“Perfect.”

Whenever I thought about the fact that Helen was being held captive somewhere in this town, I wanted to rush out and rescue her right away. But no matter how impatient I felt, the fact-finding part of the mission would take as long as it takes.

The coachman—his name was Franz, I found out—asked Camilo, “What should I do?”

“You’ll be gathering intel while Eizo and I are at the Open Market,” Camilo ordered. “Look for large storehouses with an unusually low amount of traffic for their size.”

“Understood,” Franz said.

“We’ll check out the lay of the land tomorrow,” said Camilo.

Franz and I nodded, and our day drew to a close.

###

The next morning, we took the carriage to the Open Market. Franz was steering as usual.

Being a trading hub, the town had a large Open Market district. Most of the merchants selling in the market also had permanent storefronts here, so it wasn’t surprising that the market was so big. The rules were similar to the ones in the city back at home: entry fees were based on the size of the rented space, and anyone without a stand could borrow one and set up in a free spot of their choosing.

We paid for a decently sized space, but since our primary goal wasn’t actually to do business, we chose a spot on the fringes of the market. I would only be

using a bare-bones furnace too. Camilo lined up the knives at the front of the booth and then opened up for business. Occasionally, he would appeal to passersby by performing demonstrations of the knives' sharp edges.

Behind the booth, I lit the furnace and prepared it for use.

Once I had it ready, one man came up to us, removed a sword he had strapped to his waist, and presented it to Camilo. "Can you repair this?"

Camilo turned around and looked at me. I got up, took the proffered sword, and unsheathed it.

It was a beautiful sword, but it only just *barely* fit in its sheath. There were dents in the sword body and chips along the blade. It was made with...steel, my cheat-aided assessment informed me.

Peace of cake.

"No problem. I can fix it," I told the man.

"How long will it take?" he asked.

"About an hour. I'll need to sharpen the blade. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll take it off your hands for now."

"Please," the man said before turning around to leave.

"I didn't think I'd *actually* be doing any smithing," I told Camilo.

He joked back, "If you build a reputation for yourself here, are you going to move shop?"

"Stop spouting nonsense."

We both laughed, and I transferred the sword to the anvil.

Time to get to work.

I settled in to fix the sword the customer had given me. The blade wasn't so beaten up or chipped that I would have to heat the metal in order to repair it—if it'd been dented to the point that it no longer slid into its sheath, I would've first heated the steel and quenched the blade afterward. However, the issues

weren't so major.

That wasn't surprising. This might go without saying, but unless a sword was extremely valuable or beloved, people usually bought a replacement before their sword was so damaged that it needed major repair work.

I got to work, hammering out the dents along the blade. The clang of my hammer against the metal made a racket, but I didn't hold anything back. Off in the distance, I could hear the loud noises of something or other being made, so I wasn't the only one crafting here.

When I cast my focus out across my surroundings, I could tell that the magic levels here were low, just like the city and capital in the kingdom. I could fix the dents in this sword, but I wouldn't be able to imbue it with magic.

But there wasn't any need to—I wasn't intending to greatly improve the sword. As I worked through the repairs, I aimed loosely for the quality of one of my elite models. That should give me a result that was close enough to the original quality of the sword.

I continued hammering until I had smoothed out the blade. Afterward, I only needed to sharpen it.

I concentrated as I whetted the sword edge, working until there were no chips left. While no one would mistake the sword for brand new, it now looked well-loved instead of battered.

"That should do it," I announced when I was satisfied with the job.

"You're done?" Camilo asked.

"That I am."

I gave the sword one last thorough wipe down and then showed it to Camilo.

"You're quite the hand at repair work," he commented. "What am I saying? Of course you are."

"I would be a shoddy excuse for a blacksmith if I weren't, don't you think?" I quipped.

"Fair enough."

Suddenly, I remembered something. “Come to think of it, we didn’t discuss the repair fee with the customer.”

I’d taken on the job right away, but I hadn’t decided on a price, and the man hadn’t asked.

“This kind of work is usually priced according to the going rate of the market,” Camilo explained.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Considering the size of this town, my guess is somewhere between five copper pieces to a silver.”

The maximum price of one silver coin put the work at the same cost as one of our forge’s entry-level models. Well, that was the price Camilo paid us...but he surely marked it up for his customers to account for his expenditures and to ensure that he turned a profit. Therefore, the repair had ended up being cheaper than buying a new sword, so it made sense that the customer had come to have his sword fixed.

“What about this sword in particular?” I asked.

“Probably one silver,” Camilo answered casually.

“I see.”

“It’s not *quite* as good as new, but you’ve gotten it pretty darn near close. If he complains, I’ll give him one of the new swords and keep this one for myself,” Camilo’s tone was one of absolute certainty.

I nodded and left it at that.

Not long after, the man who had commissioned the repair returned to our stand.

“How goes it?” he asked.

“It’s done,” I told him, handing back the repaired sword in its sheath.

The man drew the blade and inspected it.

“How does it look?” I asked.

I had fixed it to a degree where I thought he wouldn't have any complaints, but if he were the pain-in-the-ass kind of customer, he might find something to nitpick at.

I braced myself, but that turned out to be unnecessary.

"Looks pretty good," the man said agreeably. "Will a silver do?"

"Yes, that's perfect," I replied, keeping my tone even and suppressing my shock—I didn't want it to show on my face.

The man took out a silver coin from his pocket and passed it to me then left with a spring in his step.

I was at a loss for what to do afterward. Since I couldn't leverage any magical energy, I couldn't muster up the motivation to forge anything new. I had brought a decent supply of plate metal that was already imbued with magic. This gave me some degree of flexibility, but if I used them up carelessly I could find myself stuck at a critical moment.

The goods we'd brought for sale were also Forge Eizo products. Theoretically, I could scrap them for their metal, but that was something I wanted to avoid as well. That being said, the idea of churning out a bunch of limited-quality products was unappealing.

So, in the end, I could only do repair work.

Camilo was a different story. The swords and knives were selling like hot cakes, and he was juggling the investigation at the same time.

A man soon stopped by the booth to buy our goods in bulk. He was likely a merchant, the same as we were.

Camilo took the opportunity to probe him for information. "We're considering opening up a storefront here," he said. "Would you know of any good properties? Ideally, somewhere spacious with little freight traffic."

Unfortunately, the customer conducted most of his business while traveling and didn't have any roots in town. He didn't know much, but he did share some information about empty storehouses here and there, any of which could've been the location where Helen was being held prisoner.

That was how we spent our day in the market. Time to gather more concrete proof.

We had dinner at a tavern instead of our inn to continue the hunt for information and evidence—it was a good opportunity to narrow down our suspects. Gathering intel was a balance between risk-taking, which yielded better results, and restraint, to prevent our true motives from being exposed.

Our cover story was that we were considering setting up a store in town. Of course, we weren't actually going to do any such thing, so this meant our story wasn't airtight. Hopefully we could finish the mission and say goodbye to this town before our cover was blown. And ideally we would take advantage of a moment of turmoil to flee, but it was unlikely we'd have the luxury of timing our escape so perfectly.

We kept a low profile as we sounded out the other tavern patrons for information, sticking to lines like, "This town sure seems like a good place to do business," and "We'll need a storehouse, but building a new one's out of the question. A rental will have to do."

We didn't have any breakthroughs, but we did collect tidbits of useful information. If we followed up on the leads, we should be able to figure out what we really needed to know.

We kept up the charade through dinner (and went light on the drinks). After we ate, we returned to the inn.

"So I went digging for information today," Franz said. The three of us had once again convened in Camilo's room.

"How did it go?" I asked.

Gathering intel wasn't my forte, so the investigation was primarily being handled by the other two.

"I checked out six different places. Three are in the clear. One seems to be a likely candidate, but I don't have any conclusive evidence yet. The remaining two are suspicious, but less so."

After listening to Franz's report, I cut in. "Shall we raid your top candidate?"

"That might be premature," Camilo replied. "If we sneak in without solid proof, we might end up being normal burglars."

"I see..."

He was right. Breaking into a storehouse that Helen wasn't even held in would make us no different than your garden-variety thief. That wasn't a big deal in and of itself, but we couldn't predict how Helen's captors would react to the news that someone had deliberately broken into an empty storehouse.

Camilo had the right idea—we needed to proceed with caution.

"I got it," I said. "In that case, I'll keep up the blacksmith pretense in the meantime."

"Please," Camilo said. "That said, depending on how the rebellion plays out, we might not have that luxury."

"Is that so?"

"If the rebels make their move, we'll have to take a chance on whichever place is the most suspicious. The chaos of a revolt should obscure the break-in, even if we get it wrong. More importantly, once the revolution is underway, anything could happen."

"I see."

"Tomorrow, I'll narrow down the list and come up with a plan of attack for the top candidate," Franz concluded.

With that, we wrapped up our discussion and called it a night.

###

We spent our second day in town in much the same way as we had the first—namely, we received a decent number of repair requests.

Could the customer from yesterday have helped advertise our services?

At the cost of one silver coin per repair, we were turning a fair bit of profit. I was thankful for the reception of course, but since blacksmithing wasn't our goal for today, I had mixed feelings about our success.

We ate supper at the tavern once again before retiring to the inn.

“That one storehouse is without a doubt the most suspicious,” Franz reported when we met up. “There’s almost no one going in or out of it. The other two locations don’t see much freight traffic, but foot traffic is a different story.”

Camilo cocked his head. “Right...”

There was no way to hide a person in a place where someone (aka the people renting the storage) could come in at any time.

Camilo thought for a while and then said, “Let’s check out the situation of that storehouse tomorrow. Once we’re confident we have the right target, we can proceed with the extraction.”

It was nearly go time, and I swore to give the rescue mission everything I had. In the meantime, I could only pray that Helen was still safe.

###

The next day, we went into town instead of setting up a stand in the Open Market.

Camilo assured me, “No one’s going to find it fishy that we’re doing something else after working the booth for two days,” so it looked like we were safe on that front.

The plan was to finally check out the most suspicious storehouse. We set out for it midmorning.

After entrusting the carriage to the workers at the inn, we hit the road as a trio. I was again reminded of the town’s diversity, which I had noted the day we’d arrived. Like in the kingdom, people of all races mingled here.

I saw beastfolk as well as Malitos and dwarves. Though, since there wasn’t enough magic in town to sustain the elves’ lifestyle, there weren’t any around.

There was one glaring difference between this town and the city in the kingdom: the giants.

I decided to ask Camilo about it. “Unlike back home, I’ve seen a lot of giants here.”

“Yeah, giants are a race that originally lived in the empire. It’s often tough for them to travel far from their homeland, so the majority of them still live here.”

“I see.”

Did the humans migrate into the giants’ territory...or had it been the other way around? Either way, they’d formed an alliance during the famous war against the demon kingdom six hundred years ago and had been living together in harmony(?) ever since.

I took a close look at the street stalls as we passed and saw that certain items were priced differently for humans (and races of similar stature) and giants; because of the giant’s larger physique, they needed more sustenance. Knowing that, it made a certain amount of sense that they were ill-suited to long journeys and military expeditions.

“Are they going to be joining the you-know-what?” I asked.

“Yeah,” replied Camilo. “Their numbers are great, and they’re citizens of the empire as well. They’re treated much the same as humans are.”

“It’s going to be mayhem with them added into the mix,” I said.

“They’re a vital asset in terms of sheer power...”

The sight of a giant-sized weapon being simply swung around was enough to strike fear into the hearts of anyone watching. If the giants joined in the rebellion, they would be as great of a threat as siege engines. I could easily imagine the terror of the troops that had to defend against that kind of firepower.

On the other hand, the chaos could be a boon for us. If the fighting broke out during the rescue, we could use it as a cover to make our escape.

“Our destination is just ahead,” Franz said, stopping in his tracks.

We were a little ways away from downtown but still on the town’s outskirts.

“We’re closer to the town center than I expected,” I remarked.

“Moving her farther out would’ve been more difficult. It would have stood out too much,” Camilo reasoned. “It’s much more convenient to pick a location that’s out of the way, but where one can still blend into a crowd when

necessary.”

“And it’s convenient for us too.”

“Yup.”

Because the entrance was set farther back, it was difficult to get a glimpse inside. We couldn’t peer in without looking shady, and we couldn’t run the risk of someone remembering our faces.

So, we rounded to the back of the building instead.

Directly behind our target was another storehouse. There was a gap—like a narrow alleyway—between the two, but it didn’t seem like we would be able to break into our mark from the back.

The street was lined with stone storehouses on both sides like an additional layer of defensive walls. There were several other people besides the three of us walking along the street, so we melded into the crowd and moved along with the current of traffic.

“The fact that we can’t see inside really throws a wrench into the works,” Camilo muttered as we walked past. “Not that I hadn’t been expecting this.”

“Storehouses aren’t the most open of spaces,” I said. “Isn’t there anywhere we can take a peek? Is there a sewer system here?”

“There is,” Franz answered, “but there’s no reason for it to run under the storehouse...”

That meant we wouldn’t be able to use the sewers as an escape route either.

Helen’s captors wouldn’t have needed a secondary escape route...not to hold someone captive.

“What to do?” Camilo mused as he paced.

“I had one idea,” I said to him. “How about using the storehouse next door to sneak in?”

“How?”

“Using this,” I said, taking out my knife from my chest pocket and holding it

up.

“Huh?”

“We can sneak in by cutting a hole through the wall from the neighboring storehouse,” I explained. Of course, the plan’s feasibility depended on the thickness of the wall. The blade of my knife was around ten centimeters long; it should be able to cut through any wall that wasn’t exceptionally thick.

“I see where you’re going with this,” Camilo remarked.

“However, the flaw is obvious,” I pointed out. “We won’t be able to restore the wall afterward.”

“Which will make our getaway riskier.”

Helen’s captives would probably notice her disappearance straight away, and the hole in the wall would make it immediately clear that she had escaped. Plus, it was unlikely that we would be able to operate in perfect silence, so we had to consider the chance that we might get caught. And, it would be a piece of cake for anyone to search up who had rented out the neighboring storehouse...which would point right to us.

Camilo pondered the dilemma and then opened his mouth to speak. “During a commotion, we can force our way through the entrance, but sneaking in another way will be difficult unless we buy ourselves time somehow.”

Franz responded, “That’s true, but we have no other choice.”

I turned to Camilo. “The fact that Helen’s capture has been kept a secret works to our advantage, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. If we can just manage to get her out, it’s possible that will be the end of things,” he answered. “Our opponents stand to lose more than they would gain by openly sending out people to retrieve her. But...”

“But?”

“They might still choose to send a select few.”

“That would be troublesome.”

“Yeah,” Camilo agreed. “But that’s why you’re here, right?”

“I guess so.” I shrugged. “So, when are we making our move?”

“I want to wait for the *thing* to happen, but we run the risk of her being moved if we wait too long. At the latest, we should act the day after tomorrow.”

“And what should we do until then?” I asked.

“We’ll go about our normal business...or pretend to at least. In the meantime, we’ll monitor this storehouse. That’ll be your job, Franz.”

Franz nodded firmly. He would inform us right away at any sign of movement.

As for what kind of work I would do to pass the time—be it repairs or otherwise—I postponed that decision for later.

Even if the work was only a cover, I didn’t want to phone it in. I had to consider what to do if I took on a job and couldn’t finish due to extenuating circumstances. Perhaps, in that case, I could forgo payment entirely.

After our scouting mission, the three of us wandered around the markets and did some shopping. We visited a variety of stores and bought goods that weren’t available in the city back home.

The shopping was part camouflage and part good business sense—it was a golden opportunity to stock up on products that were expensive outside of the empire. Traveling around the empire was almost certain to become very difficult in the near future. A cunning plan indeed.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Camilo said, stopping me. “I wanted to give this to you while I have the chance.”

He took out a single wooden plank from his breast pocket.

I accepted it and looked at its surface. “You’re giving me the travel permit?” The words on the wood granted its holder permission to travel around the empire and declared the holder a citizen of the kingdom. In essence, it granted the holder the right to return across the border.

“Yeah. I want you to take this with you just in case, so you can escape without me,” Camilo explained. “Got it?”

“But...”

My mission was to rescue Helen, and I had assumed that we’d be going home with Camilo and Franz as a group of four. Should the worst come to pass, I’d hoped we would put our heads together and come up with a plan for all of us to go home.

I opened my mouth to say just that, but Camilo cut in before I could. “I said, got it?” he repeated, and his tone brooked no argument.

I was overwhelmed by the rare pressure he was exerting and could only muster a nod in response.

###

The next day, we decided to rent out the storehouse behind our target for a week under the pretext of needing a temporary place to store goods. Franz handled all the paperwork, and obviously gave a false name.

Franz then stayed behind at the storehouse to “work” while monitoring our target. Camilo and I returned to the Open Market to set up a booth since we had two days to go and needed to conduct business as normal.

Thanks to the positive reviews from the first two days, there was a steady flow of customers who wanted their weapons repaired. We even had a customer who gushed, “I was seriously at my wits end when you weren’t here yesterday. Thank goodness you’re back.”

As a blacksmith, I was pleased, but any happiness I felt was tempered by the thought of the task waiting for us. Camilo was also racking up sales, but judging from his long face I guessed that he was feeling similarly.

“I didn’t expect there to be so many repair requests,” I told Camilo. I placed a customer’s sword on the anvil and began to hammer it.

“Yeah, me neither. To think all of these swords suddenly need to be fixed. Could it be...?” Camilo trailed off.

A large number of weapons were needed for a reason Camilo wouldn’t want to talk about in public... I could only think of one circumstance.

“They’re going to be used for *that*, huh?” I said.

“Yeah.”

All the pieces fell into place when I remembered that the rebels were going to make their move very soon.

This town was a trading hub, which meant that it was a gathering place for both money and goods. Control of this town would give the insurgents easy access to provisions and, from the opposite perspective, it would make it difficult for the empire to resupply.

By cutting off the empire’s supply lines, the rebels wouldn’t have to fight for complete domination. They would only have to cause a mess and wait for the empire’s gears to grind to a halt.

However, this was a big town, so such a strategy would be difficult to pull off without a large number of people.

There hadn’t been any noticeable similarities among the people who’d come to us for repairs, which meant that a trigger was needed to pull people from all different backgrounds together. The only explanation I could think of was the upcoming rebellion.

“It looks like we’re going to need to be careful,” I said.

“Yeah,” Camilo concluded. We returned to our respective work.

In the end, Franz never came running, and we stayed at the booth the entire day.

That evening when the three of us met up, we decided to break into the storehouse the following night. With that settled, I returned to my own room.

I was dead asleep when someone started banging loudly on my door.

Knock, knock, knock!

I startled awake and bolted up. “Who’s there?!” I demanded.

“It’s me!” The voice belonged to Camilo.

I scrambled to open the door. “What is it?”

“Can’t you hear it? It’s begun!”

Between the shock of my sudden awakening and my lingering drowsiness, I hadn't noticed before, but now that I was listening I could hear the continuous clanging of a bell.

So, this is it.

I quickly packed to leave, and the three of us flew out of the inn together.

Outside, it was chaos everywhere we looked.

It was the dead of night. There were no street lamps of course, but here and there, burning torches bobbed and weaved like the floating flames of human souls. Only the areas around the torches were brightly lit.

"What do we do?" I asked Camilo.

"We bust in through the front," he replied. "The problem is getting there in one piece."

Groups of what I guessed were revolutionaries were moving all around us, and the torches they carried lit the surroundings. With the moon out, at least we weren't operating blind.

Still, we weren't going to be able to move as quickly as we could during the day, and in this race against time, every little speed bump felt like a stab to the chest.

"Let's bring the torches we sell and carry them unlit," Camilo suggested. "If we run into any of the rebels along the way, we'll pretend to be one of them and ask them for a light."

Franz and I both nodded, and Franz dashed off into the darkness. It was nearly pitch black, but he moved with speed and confidence.

Once Franz had disappeared from sight, I turned to Camilo. "Say...Franz isn't a normal coachman, is he?" He was too skilled at too many things to be your average coachman; not that I was in any position to speak, seeing as I was a blacksmith who also had a lot of esoteric talents.

"You're not wrong," Camilo replied vaguely. He declined to share the details, but there was no mistake that steering carriages wasn't Franz's real job.

A versatile blacksmith, an adaptable coachman, and a merchant who had

connections all over the place. You could hardly find a more suspicious trio...that was, if you knew our true identities. Of course, the guards had their hands full at the moment and had no time to be paying attention to the likes of us.

Franz came hurrying back with three torches. Locating the torches in this darkness had certainly taken some skill.

“Let’s hurry,” I urged, not addressing anyone in particular.

We booked it away from the inn as fast as we could. Franz took the lead, his footsteps sure. It took all I had to keep up with him.

As expected, we were slower than we’d been in the daylight. The fastest we could move in the dark was a light jog. I prayed we’d be able to get some light soon.

“Halfway there!” Franz called out.

Around the same time, we saw a light from around the corner. If it was revolutionaries ahead of us, we would be fine, but guards would spell trouble.

I drew the shortsword on my waist. Franz positioned himself a slight distance away.

Two men rounded the corner. They were wearing leather armor and held their shortswords out in position. However, their armor was unmarked. Had they been guards, their armor would have been branded with the crest of the family or town they were employed by. Crests were like the badges police had in my previous world, so the fact that I couldn’t see any meant that...

“Fellow brothers-in-arms!” Camilo called toward the men, signaling to them that we were all on the same side. However, the two of them weren’t ready to drop their guards just yet. “Relax. We joined in the cause just earlier and are heading toward the storehouses. Mind if we borrow your light?” Camilo asked, gesturing at their torches.

I sheathed my sword as well to show that I bore them no ill will.

The men tilted their torches and held them out to us. Franz touched our torches to theirs to light them. Still wary, the two men went on their way. I

never figured out if they were rebels or just looters taking advantage of the tumult.

But there was no time to think about that. With our torches lit, we could move faster—that was what was important.

We broke into a full run from our previous jog. In the end, it only took us slightly longer to get to the storehouse than it had during the day.

Around the storehouses, men were running around in confusion.

Could Helen already have been moved?

There was only one way to find out. We had to get into the storehouse.

“Get out of my way!” I hollered as I sprinted at the men who, having seen our torches, took up defensive stances.

I passed my torch into my non-dominant hand and drew my sword. At the sight of my naked blade, several people ran, but others stood their ground.

I raised my sword above my head and swung it down at my opponents...or so I led them to think. Instead, I threw my torch at them. With a flaming torch flying toward them, the men flinched in fear, as anyone would.



I seized my chance and dashed in with my sword. The large gap between our skill levels combined with the opening I'd created allowed me to easily cut down several people. A few of the rest charged at me, brandishing their own weapons, but I made quick work of them with sweeping strokes of my sword.

I'd taken down five people when Franz called out "Leave the rest to me!" and ran in to take my place. Picking up my discarded torch, I rushed through the cracked open door of the storehouse.

Inside, all was quiet.

Everyone must've been drawn outside by mayhem and the sounds of fighting, and my combat cheats backed up that hypothesis. I couldn't sense anyone who was looking to hurt me, though a person lurking in the shadows might put me in a jam.

Though I was antsy and impatient, I forced myself to move slowly as I progressed deeper into the storehouse.

Technically, it was probably forbidden to bring torches into this space; the risk of starting a fire was high. I was extremely careful and made sure that the flames wouldn't accidentally catch on any of the goods.

Finally, I reached the end of the storehouse. I still hadn't seen neither hide nor hair of a single person, but now I could sense that there was someone in here.

I raised my torch and inspected my surroundings. Boxes of merchandise (I assumed) were stacked in piles all around me. When I peered carefully into one of the corners, I noticed a gap that was just big enough for a person to squeeze into.

I lowered my torch so I wouldn't set anything on fire and eased into the passageway. I could feel the heat on my skin, but I paid it no mind.

The passage soon widened and opened up into a confined space. It didn't stink of urine or waste, but there was definitely a whiff of the acrid musk that humans give off. The presence I'd felt had come from this room—no mistake about it, I was no longer alone. There were no boxes above me, so I held my torch aloft.

In the light of the flames, I saw a body moving ever so slightly in the room. I rushed over immediately.

The person lying prone on her side had red hair, which had grown out slightly, and a familiar face. Her arms were cuffed behind her back, and her ankles were also chained to prevent escape.

From her minute movements, I could tell that she was still alive, but she lacked the energy to do anything.

“Helen,” I murmured to the person lying before me.

She twitched and slowly turned her face toward me. “Ei...zo...?”

Her face, marred by the knife scar, had become gaunt, but it still possessed hints of its owner’s former spunk and charm. It was a face I was very familiar with.

“Yeah, it’s me,” I said gently. “I’m here to rescue you. For starters, let’s get you out of these chains right now.”

“Eizo!” Helen cried, struggling to raise herself up to a sitting position. However, her usual strength was nowhere to be found, and she failed to rise.

Just how long has she been held captive?

Fury toward her captors welled up within me, but I tamped it down. My first priority was getting Helen out of here.

I set the torch onto the ground and then crouched slowly by her side to take a look at her restraints. The cuffs themselves were sturdy and wouldn’t be easy to break, but the locks seemed basic—they looked like they could be cracked open with a knife.

“Stay still,” I commanded.

I lined up my knife with the lock and pushed down. It didn’t snap apart—I hadn’t expected it to—but I managed to open up a small crack, enough to break it open.

Helen was chained at both wrists and both ankles. I broke all four of the locks the same way, freeing her limbs.

As soon as she was free, she grabbed me and hugged me tightly, with no signs of letting go.

“H-Hey, Helen,” I stammered.

“Eizo. Eizo...” Helen mumbled, gripping my arms tightly.

Knowing everything she had gone through, there was no way I could coldly shake her off.

“You’re safe now. Relax,” I reassured her while gently removing her hands.

I went to put away my knife. When I inspected it, I noticed there were several small chips in the blade.

My knife can cut through iron, the same metal it’s made of, and get away with only minor damages...

I wasn’t surprised at the fact, but it was remarkable all the same.

However, looking at it another way, the blade had been damaged from cutting open four thin pieces of iron, so thick bars would be impossible to cut through. Supposing I was thrown in a cell, even if I managed to sneak in one of my custom model blades, I would have a hard time using it to escape.

I didn’t know what’d happened to the dual blades I had forged for Helen. It went without saying, but they weren’t in the room—they had likely already fallen into the hands of one of the empire’s cronies. However, Franz and Camilo were waiting outside for us, so there was no time to look for them either. They were a tough loss to swallow, but there was nothing we could do about it now.

I removed the broken cuffs from Helen’s wrists and ankles then picked up my torch. I lent Helen my shoulder, and she obediently slung an arm around my neck, leaning her weight on me.

“Is there anything you need to take with you no matter what?” I asked her.

“My swords...” she said in a weak voice.

“I’ll forge you new ones,” I promised. “Forget about those.”

Helen gave a tiny nod. We slowly walked together out of the storehouse.

Two people holding torches were waiting just inside the entrance: Camilo and

Franz.

“Are you two all right?” I called out to them, and they nodded.

“Looks like everything went well for you too,” Camilo said.

“Yeah. Thank god our prediction was right,” I said. “I didn’t know what we were going to do if she wasn’t here.”

“All right then—time to go,” Camilo urged.

I tossed my torch to the ground and picked up Helen in a princess carry. Slinging her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes was out of the question, and we were moving too slowly with her leaning on me.

I thought Helen would protest more, but she sagged against me without comment and kept still.

“You’re the knight who’s just rescued his princess,” Camilo joked.

“I have to bring her home safe and sound before I can be knighted,” I said lightly.

I’d been on edge this entire time, but I could finally relax a fraction.

My moment of peace lasted a split second before we had to get moving again. We mentally braced ourselves and charged out the door. The area around the storehouses had been relatively quiet when we first arrived, but it had since grown more raucous. Shouts of anger and screams of pain could be heard all around us. The number of people had increased too.

Off in the distance, I spotted a pillar of fire climbing into the sky, the flames garish and glaring.

“Get out of the way!” I yelled as we ran through the pandemonium.

Carrying Helen might have been the key to our success. No one tried to approach us. It must’ve looked like I was carrying an injured person away from the scene...not that the truth was much different.

Helen was taller than I was, and her weight was appropriate for her height. Thankfully, because of my increased muscle strength from my cheats, I wasn’t struggling to carry her.

As we ran, I glanced at Helen to see how she was doing, but she kept her face down and made no sound. She must have gone through a lot while she'd been a prisoner, a fact which only fueled my resolve to take her away from this town even a second sooner. I ran as fast as I could, trying hard not to slow down.

We dashed toward the main street, which was a scene of chaos.

Some people were holding torches in their hands, lighting the whole mayhem in a flickering light.

There was a stream of people trying to find their way out of the town by way of the torchlight. A second group of people was fighting to take control of the town. Their opponents fought back just as hard. On the main street, these three groups converged into one giant mess.

As we waded through the crowd, Camilo bellowed, "We've got an injured person here! Move!"

The horde seemed to still have a thread of rationality because people parted to make way for us.

The takeover looked like it was going well. It wasn't one of those plans that was doomed from the start...or so I wanted to believe.

Ideally, we should be able to use the turmoil and slip away before things settle down, which should take several more hours. If we miss our window, it'll become more difficult to escape.

"I hope our inn won't be set ablaze," I said to the other two as we ran. Fires had seemingly popped up all over town.

"We should be okay," Camilo replied.

"Yes, it would be disadvantageous to the rebels to be seizing people's homes for the purpose of housing their fighters," Franz interjected. "Instead, they'll commandeer guard barracks or inns to use as temporary garrisons."

"I see. Why burn down a place that could be used later on, right?" I said.

"Exactly," Franz confirmed.

A successful takeover of this town would be a major strategic victory, but the

revolution didn't end there. The fighting would continue until the emperor was overthrown at the very least. Until then—be it in three days or a year—the rebels would have to maintain control over this town.

The revolutionaries may need to enact sieges to advance their goals. Noble estates were particularly fitting candidates. Perhaps they would burn down one or two as examples to show their determination toward the cause.

We pushed through the crowds, opposite the flow of traffic, and finally made it back to our inn, which was still standing, unharmed. Thankfully, any strategic takeovers had yet to begin.

We hurried to our carriage. A burly guard with a large bludgeon, the same guard who we'd seen when we had first arrived, was watching over the carriages.

Camilo hollered, "Sorry for the short notice, but we're leaving!"

"Sure! You lot aren't the first!" the guard yelled back just as loudly.

If we had come on a normal cart, we could've abandoned it and followed the other runaways out of town on foot. However, Camilo's carriage had that little special something built into its works. Leaving it behind now would have consequences for his future business.

There were fewer carriages parked here than when we had first arrived. After we located ours, the first thing we did was lift Helen into the back. As I was about to set her down, she squeezed my arm for a split second but quickly let go.

In the meantime, Franz brought the horses over and hitched them up. Camilo and I both climbed onto the cart. I moved Helen farther in where she wouldn't stand out, laid her down, and covered her with a blanket.

She looked so feeble and lonely lying there. I took her hand and held it tight. As the horses began to walk forward, I felt her grip my hand back.

The main street was crowded and rowdy, but we followed behind the other carts making their way out of town. The line was moving no faster than walking speed.

Camilo and I kept watch. We had made sure to clean up after ourselves, but our faces *had* been seen, so we were on the lookout for signs of pursuers. In the middle of this bedlam, our opponents were unlikely to be able to stage a proper retaliation, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

I cast a gaze over our surroundings. There were people leaving town on foot too, but they were all in traveler's garb. In other words, the townspeople were all holed up in their own homes, while the people fleeing were mostly merchants or visitors.

I considered offering rides to people traveling with small children, but people flowed out of the town gates in a constant stream like water from a faucet (basically, the guards were no longer doing their jobs). I didn't see anyone who needed help, and soon enough we were also spat out of the town.

Chapter 8: The Great Escape

Our crew weren't the only ones fleeing in the middle of the night—we were in good company.

Now that we were officially out of the town, we only had to keep following the path back to the border. The road itself was narrow and the crowd had self-organized; people traveling by foot walked on one side and carts moving at a faster clip stayed on the other.

Travelers, walkers, and riders alike carried torches which illuminated both sides of the road and formed a pathway of light. It felt like I was driving down a highway in my previous world. The flickering flames didn't give me any feelings of unease either. If anything, the scene before me was beautiful.

We rode along the path of torchlight, just one carriage in a very long line.

Our carriage bounced and shook less than the others around us, but since we weren't moving quickly, the difference wasn't obvious. Besides, I doubted anyone on the road with us had the luxury of paying attention to such a minor detail.

Camilo took out the wig he'd stashed in the cart and passed it to me.

"Helen," I said.

She'd been holding my hand this entire time and hadn't said a word. Now, she angled her face slightly toward me and murmured, "Hm? What is it, Eizo?" Some color had returned to her cheeks since I'd first found her.

"I'm going to put this over your head," I told her. "Word of your physical appearance should be slow to spread, but this is just a precaution."

"Okay," she replied, her voice faint. "Thanks."

I set her hand down gently and placed the medium-length blonde wig on her head. Thankfully, Helen's hair was short, so the wig settled into place neatly without me having to pin up her real hair. Next, I adjusted the sides of the wig

to better hide the scar on her face. Camilo had likely chosen a wig with a longer hairstyle for this exact purpose.

“Aaand done,” I announced. “It might tickle, but bear with it.”

Helen nodded obediently. “Okay.”

It was still dark, so we wouldn’t have to fear Helen being discovered just yet. Better to put the wig on her now before the sun showed its face... That would help us avoid problems later on. Helen grabbed my hand again and then, with her free hand, arranged the wig.

And so, the four of us continued down the road away from the town.

By the time we’d left all of the pedestrians behind us, the sky was beginning to lighten. We had come quite a long way, and the travelers on foot couldn’t keep up with the horse-drawn carriages.

I hoped the walkers would be able to make their escape without incident.

“Now that we’ve come this far, we should be safe from pursuit,” Camilo remarked.

Franz slowed the cart. “Let’s take a break here,” he suggested. “The horses could use a rest too.”

I nodded, and Franz pulled up along the side of the road.

Light was just beginning to creep into the sky by the time Camilo, Franz, and I had finished setting up camp. It would be difficult to sleep soundly, but it was important to get whatever rest we could. Of course, we had Helen take it easy the entire time. We laid her on the ground on top of a blanket, and we covered her with a second one.

“We should have a bite to eat as well,” I said.

I built a fire, set up a tripod of logs, and then hung a pot of water over the fire. When the water was boiling, I threw in some dried meat and beans to stew.

We had plenty of water. Since we hadn’t known when we’d have to make a hasty exit from the town, we had made sure to keep a cask of water in the cart at all times. That foresight turned out to be a blessing now.

In the light of the morning, the fire didn't stand out, but unfortunately the column of smoke rising to the sky would be visible from far away. However, I had to stew the meat, because otherwise it would be too tough for Helen to digest.

I was taking the first shift on watch, so I kept an eye on the pot and our surroundings at the same time. Camilo and Franz bundled themselves in blankets and laid down to rest. Before long, I heard the sounds of them breathing deeply—they'd fallen sound asleep.

In the daylight, I could see everything around us in a wide radius. On the bright side, we wouldn't be taken by surprise by any wild animals, but any pursuers would be able to spot us from a mile away. I climbed aboard the carriage to look around and saw that there were no other travelers resting near us. There was, however, a real chance that pursuers might come to investigate (if they were doing their due diligence), so I had to be careful.

I jumped back down and peeked at the pot over the fire. When I glanced over at Helen to check her condition, I noted that she was sleeping with a peaceful expression. *I can't imagine she slept well while being held captive...*

Who knows what awaits us from here on out. Rest and recover while you have the chance, I prayed while stirring the stew.

I spent the next hour alternating between keeping watch, stirring the pot, and topping off the water, all the while coming dangerously close to dozing off.

The sun had climbed halfway to the apex. I'd seen several carriages flying down the road away from the town, but none headed in the opposite direction—some escapees might've been spreading the word of what had happened to anyone traveling toward the town.

The people who were fleeing were probably desperate to get out of the empire as quickly as they could. I wondered what'd happened to the girl I'd mistaken for a boy. There was little reason for those children selling fruit to leave town, but I hoped they wouldn't get caught up in the mess.

Once the meat and beans in the stew were sufficiently tender, I roused the other three for breakfast.

As we sat down for the meal, I asked Helen, “Did they feed you properly?”

“More or less,” she replied. “Mostly wheat porridge and the like.”

Hearing that, I went light on the meat and heavy on the beans in Helen’s portion—the meat *was* pretty tender, so I didn’t think her stomach would rebel, but it was better not to risk shocking her system.

The stew was flavored only with salt from the jerky and the broth, and it contained only meat and beans. This was a protein-only dish (though it did have both animal and plant proteins) that declared loud and proud: “Nutritional balance? What’s that?” Nonetheless, it was still better to eat something than nothing. We would feel better afterward.

None of us, including me, said anything as we concentrated on filling our empty stomachs.

I occasionally glanced at Helen to see how she was feeling. Several hours had passed since we’d fled town, and she was now looking more energetic. However, I thought it would be better to delay asking her about what had happened...at least until we made it back to the kingdom.

Once we’d eaten our fill, I cleaned up the pot and put out the fire. The sun was shining brightly. Franz took his turn standing guard while Camilo, Helen, and I laid down to rest.

###

When I finally woke up, I wasn’t sure how long I’d been asleep. Judging by the position of the sun, it wasn’t yet noon, but I had gotten in a solid midmorning nap.

“Look who’s awake,” Camilo remarked.

“G’morning,” I replied. Apparently, I had slept through the shift change between Franz and Camilo.

I stretched from head to toe. Then, I bunched up my blanket and tossed it into the back of the carriage.

“We should get going again soon,” Camilo said. “The towns on the way back might not be taking in strangers, so we’ll have to camp until we leave the

empire. We can stop for breaks as needed.”

“We should also prepare for the possibility of leaving the main road, right?” I asked. “How familiar are you with this region?”

“I have a map, which should be just fine as long as we’re not going too far.”

“All right. Sounds like we’ll manage one way or another.”

So there’s a map, eh? I doubted it was anything as thorough and detailed as the land surveys performed by the Geospatial Information Authority of Japan. In this world, geographic data was treated more like military secrets.

In any case, our goal was simply to get away from the empire, so even a rough map would give us an idea of which direction to go.

Camilo woke Franz while I roused Helen and helped her into the carriage. Camilo and I cleaned up the campsite and then climbed in ourselves.

Now that it was daytime, we saw more people on foot. We joined the traffic—which was moving at a relatively slow pace—and journeyed steadily farther from the town.

Rocky mountains rose up in the distance. The road split the dreary plains like a line drawn with a crayon. I could see clouds looming on the horizon, but the weather today was clear. Though the road wasn’t packed per se, there was certainly a notable amount of people fleeing.

Helen stared vacantly at the other travelers without saying anything. With one hand, she gripped the hem of my shirt tightly. She had somewhat recovered from her ordeal and was looking less pale, however it hadn’t even been a full day since we’d rescued her. We hadn’t been able to inform her about our rescue mission in advance either, so she was probably feeling whiplashed by the rapid developments since last night. For now, I thought it best to let her be.

Considering the number of people now on the road, it wasn’t going to be easy to tell who might’ve been chasing after us and who was just a normal traveler. I kept an eye out and asked Camilo, “Isn’t there one more settlement ahead of us?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “We rode past it on the way to town.”

“And yet we haven’t seen any carriages coming from that direction...”

“The empire’s capital is back the way we came from. Obviously, everyone’s fleeing from there at the moment.”

“Is it going to be impossible to stop and restock at the next town?” I asked. “Not that I had been considering it.”

“Probably. I doubt we’ll be able to enter in the first place. It’s set apart from the main road, so I’d like to believe the throngs have given it a pass, but...”

“It would be a problem if it were jam-packed with people trying to flee.”

We would be in hot water if our pursuers caught up to us when we were locked in the middle of a swarm. Thinking about the situation in the town we’d left behind, we might have to seriously consider leaving the main road.

I consulted Camilo on my theory. “You’re right. That might be wise,” he replied, agreeing with my assessment.

Around the time the sun crossed its peak, we saw a pack of people jamming the road ahead of us, crowded around a T-intersection. Some travelers looked like they were in the middle of a break, which made sense, considering the time.

“What should we do?” I asked Camilo.

“Let’s go around.” He directed Franz to give the crowd a wide berth. “It wouldn’t be good for us to get held up here.”

Once we were off the main road, which was regularly maintained, the bouncing and shaking of the carriage grew more intense. Luckily, thanks to the suspension system (basic as it was), we were saved from sharp jolting.

“The way this carriage sways is conspicuous,” I commented.

“It does stand out a little, but not enough that an onlooker would realize there’s something different about its mechanism...although, they might feel like something is off,” Camilo said. “I’d hoped to hide the system as thoroughly as possible, but everything has its limits.”

The workings of the suspensions were concealed, so the secret wasn't likely to be leaked unless someone inspected the carriage up close. What I was worried about, though, was that the distinct motion of the carriage would make it easier for any pursuers to tail us.

But we couldn't slow down—we had no time to waste.

We didn't know whether the initial sparks of revolution back in that town were successful or not. Everything had been going smoothly when we'd left, but if the uprising was squashed, Helen's disappearance would certainly be noticed sooner or later. In that case, the chaos of the road would work in favor of our pursuers.

Anyway, under the circumstances, no one was going to find us suspicious...no matter how fast we traveled.

We made a giant detour around the intersection that connected the main road and the border town. I kept an eye out, but few people were paying attention to us—everyone was too preoccupied with their own troubles. The few passing glances we got were neither sharp nor watchful, just sent our way out of idle interest simply because we happened to be riding by. However, I wasn't a professional soldier, so I couldn't be one hundred percent positive about that. It was a toss-up as to whether or not my cheats applied here as well...

The four of us continued on our journey back to the kingdom. I was relieved that we'd managed to avoid the snarl of foot traffic and carriages. On the other side of today, the inspection station was waiting for us.

Once we passed the traffic jam, the horde of carts and travelers on foot thinned out. Nearly everyone I saw was running away from the empire, but on the truly rare occasion, we passed travelers heading the other way—in other words, into the heart of the empire.

I wondered if they were trying to unite with family or other loved ones, but there was no way for me to know. I could only pray that they would accomplish what they'd set out to do, all without meeting any harm.

Not that this was any time to be thinking of others...not when we hadn't accomplished our own goal yet.

After we'd passed the traffic jam, Franz steered our carriage back onto the main road, which was less crowded now. He urged the horses to pick up speed. We planned to go as far as we could today and camp overnight.

Tomorrow, we would face the final checkpoint of our journey, both figurative and literal.

When the sun was beginning to set, we pulled off the road again and prepared our camp. Helen was feeling a lot better and joined in to help. Her movements were smooth and easy.

She seemed vastly improved from a mere day ago, but something could cause her condition to worsen at any moment. I trusted Helen to be able to look after herself, but I was going to be keeping an eye on her for the time being.

For dinner, we had crackers and a soup made of the random ingredients we had packed in the cart. As expected of a merchant, Camilo had brought along some spices as well. With his permission, I took some for the soup. I told him that if he minded me using them, I'd compensate him in the future, but he shook his head nonchalantly.

We sat together to eat. I watched Helen wolf down her share, smiling wryly. "Slow down. No one's going to steal your food," I teased. "Is that a habit from being on the battlefield? To scarf down a full meal when you can?"

When she answered, Helen's voice was cheerful, just the way I remembered it from her time staying with us at the forge. She had regained much of her former energy, and she replied evenly, "No, we're not on the battlefield." Then she paused. "Oh. I guess we kind of are."

We still had challenges to face ahead of us, and as we spoke, there wasn't any guarantee that we weren't being chased. All of this meant that we couldn't let down our guard just yet.

And even once we were back in the kingdom, we wouldn't be able to rest easy until we'd returned home. Thinking on that, I matched Helen's pace and began to eat a little faster.

After dinner, Camilo gave me a rundown of the plan. "When we reach the

gate tomorrow, Franz and I will go through separately from the two of you.”

“Eh?” I balked. “What for?”

“Under the circumstances, it’ll be easier for us to have our identities checked in pairs, rather than having to answer questions about why we’re traveling as such a large group.”

“The guards are probably on the lookout for refugees too.”

“Yup.”

My documents of identification were fake anyhow, but they were still a cut above anything that could have been prepared during the ongoing turmoil. That made them slightly less suspicious. Nevertheless, rather than riding together with people who looked like they had the means to forge documents, it was safer to go on foot and personally present my papers to the guard.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Are you on board, Helen?”

“Uh-huh,” Helen mumbled, slightly out of it. Now that she was full, she was starting to doze off.

“Go to sleep,” I told her. “Get plenty of rest. The three of us will stand guard tonight.”

“Okay.”

We saw Helen to bed and split the watch between the three of us. While we were off duty, we slept on the ground bundled in a blanket.

###

The night passed quietly. While I was standing guard, I occasionally saw the light of torches passing along the road, but no one came our way; the other travelers doubtlessly had no time to pay attention to us.

Once everyone was awake, we departed in our carriage. Compared to yesterday, the number of people on the road was more sparse. I guessed it was because everyone was progressing at different speeds. We rode alongside the other travelers. Exhaustion showed on the faces of the people who were walking, some of whom had probably come all the way here on foot.

I wanted to offer them rides, but our carriage couldn't possibly fit all of them and we were in a hurry. Mentally, I apologized to all the weary travelers and prayed to the goddess figurine I had stashed near my heart.

Please, protect them on the road.

Because the path ahead was less crowded, we were able to pick up speed. Right before noon, Franz hollered to let us know that we were close to the inspection station. I cast my gaze out ahead of us, but the checkpoint wasn't yet visible.

"You two should get off around here," Camilo suggested.

I grabbed my bag. Helen hadn't brought anything with her, so she stuffed some food in a sack. Together, we got off the cart.

I waved to Camilo. "See you later."

"See you," he replied.

With that, we parted ways temporarily.

"Shall we get going?" I asked Helen.

"Yeah," she replied, following slightly behind me.

"Are you okay?"

"Yup, I'm perfectly fine now."

I thought her legs might've been weakened from her long imprisonment, but her steps were unexpectedly steady.

"You should be in the clear as long as you're wearing *that*, but be careful anyway," I cautioned.

Helen smiled. "Of course." Her face, framed in the wig, looked different than usual.

Ahead of us, I caught sight of a crowd.

Showtime.

Helen had seen the crowd of travelers too. She reached out and once again took the hem of my shirt in her grip. Determination flared anew within my

heart.

The two of us took our place in the back of the line, which consisted of a mix of carriages and people.

For a brief moment, I felt a flash of terror—were the guards barring exit out of the empire and turning everyone away? But then, the line moved a tiny step forward, dispelling my fears.

Perhaps the guards hadn't yet heard about what'd transpired. Or perhaps they were still allowing passage crossings because of some other motive entirely.

Of course, it was good for us that they weren't indiscriminately driving people away. If they prevented us from entering the kingdom at this checkpoint, then we would have no choice but attempt a mountain crossing. That was a fate I was happy to avoid.

Travelers filed in behind us one after another to fill up the empty spaces in line. During the summer and winter festivals in my previous world, I was used to seeing orderly lines. However, the crowd of travelers here was a confusing jumble with four, five, six people lining up abreast in places.

I peeked up in front of us. Camilo's carriage was slightly ahead. Franz was slowly but surely easing them forward toward the gate.

Neither of them looked back our way—after all, it would be a problem if the guards found out we knew each other. Plus, Helen and I were stuck in the middle of all the other people traveling by foot, so Camilo and Franz had probably lost track of where we were.

Helen clung tightly to my side. I had told her to stay close to me where I could better protect her. Were something to happen to her now, all our efforts would've been for nothing.

Before we moved up in line—in other words, while there'd been no one surrounding us—I had informed Helen about the cover story we would tell the guards.

I was Norm, an average middle-aged craftsman who was married to a woman originally from the empire (Helen). We had come to the empire to pay a visit to

her hometown, and now that we'd concluded our business, we were heading back into the kingdom.

In this scenario, Helen was from a small village. After seeing the situation on the road, we'd realized that something big had gone down in the empire, but we didn't know any of the details. We just had to return to the kingdom and wanted to do so as quickly as possible.

After listening to the general premise, Helen blurted out, "Married? You and me?"

"You're probably unhappy to be lumped in with a geezer like me," I said, "but go along with it please. It's just a cover to get us out."

"No, that's not the problem..." Helen muttered.

Then, what is it?

She continued hesitantly. "You're...not...against it, Eizo?"

"No, why would I be?"

"I'm not exactly small and dainty..." she whispered, "and I have this scar."

"So what? There may be people who mind, but I'm not one of them," I reassured her.

Sure, her scar was eye-catching, but she was still cute. She was tall, but her figure was slim and beautiful. However, had I said all of that, there was a real chance I would've eaten Helen's fist thrown at full strength, so I kept my mouth shut.

Helen looked down at the ground. "Oh, really?"

I pretended that I didn't see the blush on her cheeks or her pleased expression.

A good deal of time had passed since we'd first joined the line. We had been standing long enough to get hungry, so we both gnawed on some jerky as a snack.

Luckily, the line had been moving forward, if only at a crawl. The progress

eased some of the irritation from the wait. Had there been a gridlock, we might've had another riot on our hands.

The road behind us was packed with people. It was just as crowded as the main road in the kingdom's capital.

In front of us, I could just see the checkpoint. I spied a few people on the other side of the gate waiting to enter the empire, but most people looked to be turning around after they saw the mass of travelers trying to get back into the kingdom.

When I had passed through here with Camilo and Franz on the way to rescue Helen, the line *into* the empire had been the long one. Now, it was just the opposite. Even so, there were more than zero people traveling into the empire. My guess was that they were originally from the empire to begin with.

After some more time had passed, I saw that it was Camilo's turn at the gate. The permit Camilo carried was authorized by some hotshot and the guard waved the carriage through with only a cursory inspection of the goods and luggage. Camilo and Franz passed through quickly compared to the other travelers.

Neither of them looked back as they entered the kingdom. The thought that Helen and I wouldn't be allowed in probably hadn't even crossed their minds. I was tickled by that faith.

"Next!" the guard called.

Finally, it was our turn. Helen gripped my hand tightly.

The guard, who looked dead on his feet, gave us the once-over. If he were to zero in on Helen's face, that would mean the jig was up. However, he didn't seem to be overly interested in her.

I took the travel pass from my breast pocket and handed it to the guard. He checked it over.

"You came from the kingdom?" he asked me.

"Indeed," I replied.

“And this woman is?”

“My missus. From the empire, she is.”

The guard furrowed his brows suspiciously. “Quite the big age difference between the two of you.”

I gently swept Helen’s hair—the wig, that was—away from her face to reveal her scar. “There wasn’t a man who wanted her with this face. But she looked darn cute to me, so I asked for her hand.”

With her face bright red, Helen slapped me on the shoulder. I didn’t know how much of her reaction was an act, but the guard’s expression eased, seeing the interaction.



“I see. Well, in that case, everything seems to be all right with your permit. You’re good to go.” At that, the guard waved us through.

I tamped down my feelings of excitement and simply said, “Thank you kindly.”

Taking Helen’s hand, I led her through the gate, careful to keep my pace at a “golly gee, I wouldn’t want to inconvenience the people behind me” briskness—in other words, fast but not suspiciously so. On the inside, I was raring to sprint ahead, leap into Camilo’s carriage, and ride away into the heart of the kingdom lickety-split. However, even a fool could see what would happen if I were to start running now.

It was difficult to suppress my impatience, but I did my best to stay calm and move at a speed no one could find fault with.

After fifteen or twenty minutes (according to my internal clock) or about one to two kilometers, we came to an open, flat field where people had amassed, so we decided to stop and check it out. Helen and I were tired from the long wait in line. Additionally, I had been away from the kingdom for several days now and was hoping to hear some news.

People of all races, ages, and genders were sitting around wherever they pleased and resting their feet. Helen and I found an open space and sat down.

Instead of brazenly plopping down on the ground and sitting with her legs crossed like she usually would, Helen tucked her legs neatly beneath her to the side. It relieved me to see her adapting according to the situation.

I took a cup out of my bag and handed it to Helen. “Here.”

“Thanks.” She took it gently.

Then, I poured her some water from my pouch, and she sipped it—I drank directly from the pouch. I’d been worried that she’d be flustered at the sudden offer to share water, despite our supposed marital status, but she drank without comment.

As a mercenary who was deployed to battlefields all over the region, it must’ve been normal for her to share drinking vessels with men and women

alike. I guzzled my water.

We slaked our thirst and munched on some dried fruit (copycat figs). Once we recovered our energy, we were able to better pay attention to what was going on around us.

The majority of folks wore weary expressions; they had probably just left the empire. Many of them were expressing their shock at the sudden turn of events.

The ones who looked distraught had most likely given up their own travels after hearing the accounts of the people who had just left the empire—perhaps they'd turned around at the gate in disappointment. Most were probably merchants planning to sell their goods in the empire, and they were now in a bind because they wouldn't be able to do business.

I listened in on the conversations around us for a while. At the very least, it didn't seem like there were people who were trying to flee *into* the empire because of a disturbance in the kingdom.

In other words, my family should be healthy and safe. Granted, the chances of anything happening to them were low...providing they stayed around the cabin.

"Is something the matter?" Helen asked me anxiously. She must've noticed me fretting. Thankfully, she had softened her usual manner of speech as well.

"No, but after all we've been through, I can't help but worry about what's happening at home." I chose my words deliberately so that anyone who overheard us talking would think it was a typical conversation between husband and wife.

Helen picked up on what I was trying to say immediately. "Everything will be okay. It's your family home." She squeezed my hand, and I gripped gently back.

"Excuse me..." said a woman.

I jumped at the unexpected inquiry and let go of Helen's hand without thinking.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," the woman said with a bow of her head. Her tone, like her words, was remorseful. "I only wanted to ask you a

question.”

I bowed my head in return. “It’s all right. I apologize for reacting so rudely.”

Helen quietly slipped behind me.

There was something that bothered me about the woman, but I didn’t want to be seen as strange for being overly suspicious. I continued speaking as if everything was perfectly normal. “What did you want to ask?”

“Did something happen over in the empire? That’s what I’ve been hearing from people around here,” she said.

“Yes, well...” I explained that my wife and I had heard of some sort of upheaval happening while we were on the road, but since we had been in my wife’s home village, we didn’t know the details.

As we talked, I tried to pinpoint the source of my discomfort, but I just couldn’t put my finger on it.

Unexpectedly, I didn’t have to—the woman revealed her secret herself.

Once I’d finished my explanation, the woman leaned in close to me. Helen started to move to cover me, but I held her back.

“Please don’t worry, Master Eizo,” the strange woman whispered. “I was sent by the Eimoors.”

I peered at the woman’s smiling face and then it dawned on me—she had attended to me during the military expedition. It was likely that she’d been sent to escort us home.

We chatted with the Eimoor servant for a time without touching on any of the circumstances in detail. Primarily, we talked about relatively benign happenings within the kingdom. As I’d suspected from what I’d overheard earlier, everything was peaceful here, at least as far as appearances went.

Come to think of it, we could be the first ones to bring back news about the revolution to the kingdom’s prominent figures. I felt a little like a spy.

All right, all right... Yes, our mission had always possessed a kind of spy-like intrigue—we’d been half-wittingly ducking around corners, and our task had been to sneak into an enemy nation and rescue key personnel. Though, since

the mission was practically over now, it was kinda too late to be feeling like a spy.

While we rested, we continued talking, and once we had recovered enough, we decided to depart straight away. Contrary to the leisurely air we were projecting, this wasn't the time for us to be taking it easy. We would also be traveling with the Eimoor family servant; she told us that she would be accompanying us halfway for the sake of our safety...which was probably half true and half lip service.

The three of us left the rest stop, putting the chattering assembly of travelers behind us. There were a decent number of other people setting out on their own journeys, but not too many—once we got a little farther out, speaking openly about our situation wouldn't carry as much risk.

We continued down the road, cutting through the flat plains with its handful of travelers. I wanted to be home as soon as possible and couldn't help but wonder how far ahead Camilo and Franz were.

Once our group was alone on the road, the servant introduced herself as Catalina.

She already knew my name, but Helen introduced herself as well, dipping her head and saying, "It's a pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine. To think I would meet the infamous Lightning Strike here!" Catalina exclaimed excitedly.

That's right... If I remember correctly, this woman's a fighter. She's probably happy to meet a person who's made her name through her combat skills. Diana had reacted the same way.

"I don't deserve that title any more," Helen grumbled darkly.

"I'll make you new swords." I squeezed her hand encouragingly. "You fell. So what? You can always get back up. But also...it's okay for you to take a rest too, y'know?"

"Eizo..."

"The two of you seem like a real married couple," Catalina remarked.

In spite of myself, I found myself flushing and looking away from Helen.

I was long out of my high school years. On the inside, I was in my forties! However, I regret to say that even in my old world, I'd had little experience with this aspect of life... So while I knew my reaction was a little bit innocent, I just didn't know how else to act in a time like this.

Helen looked embarrassed too, but she didn't shake off my hand.

After the three of us had been traveling a while longer, we saw a carriage stopped by the side of the road. I felt Helen stiffen.

Is she having a flashback to when she was captured?

"It's okay. It's just Camilo," I reassured her in my kindest voice. Helen relaxed slightly in response.

We approached the carriage slowly. When we drew near, a familiar face popped out from the top to greet us. It was indeed Camilo.

"The two of you sure took your time," he teased.

"You know the area past the checkpoint where a bunch of travelers were stopped?" I asked. "We took a short break there."

Camilo accepted my explanation without hesitation. "Aaah, I see. Both of you *did* have to stand in line the whole time... Anyway, hop on."

We climbed into the carriage as instructed.

"Hold on, aren't you going to ask about Catalina?" I wondered, finding it strange that he'd told all of us to get in without even questioning the fact that we'd picked up an additional person.

"Well, you see, I was actually the one who asked the count to check in on us after a week," Camilo explained. "Just in case, you know?"

Catalina added nonchalantly, "If you hadn't returned in another two or three days, I would've gone into the empire to find you."

Camilo had asked for backup to cover our hides...not from the margrave, who had given him the mission, but from Marius. I was curious, but Camilo must

have some sort of scheme he wasn't telling me about.

Whatever his reasons, his actions had increased the likelihood we would return home safely. I focused on that fact and gave Camilo and Catalina a neutral response.

My body was rocked to and fro as the carriage clattered down the main road. If we continued down this road, sooner or later, we would reach a town—the one we'd spent a night in on the way to the checkpoint.

There were a surprisingly large number of people on the road, so unlike when we had been traveling through the empire, we couldn't push the horses to go faster. The day when we could ride as fast as we wanted without caring about who was watching was still in the future...when *that device* could be mass-produced. This journey had proved that the prototype suspension system stood up to actual use, so the day we could ride all-out without attracting probing glances shouldn't be too far off; I looked forward to it.

Beside me, Camilo and Catalina were conversing.

"Have they begun to move?" Camilo asked.

"Yes. Nothing too large-scale, but certain people in the capital have already noticed," Catalina answered.

"There's little margin for error."

"That's right."

"What are you talking about?" I asked Camilo.

"Our favorite margrave."

"Ohhh..."

The kingdom wanted to take advantage of the chaos accompanying the revolution to expand its territory. According to what Catalina had just said, our army was already on the move.

What's going to happen to the checkpoint? I don't want there to be casualties on either side...

Thinking about Helen, I decided not to ask for any more details and leave the

issue alone for the moment.

The mountain range near the inspection point diminished into the distance behind us. We were certainly safer now, but we weren't in the clear just yet.

"Hey, Helen," I said, getting her attention while keeping one ear on Camilo and Catalina's conversation about the situation in the capital and the city.

Since getting into the carriage, she'd just been sitting quietly, but she turned to face me now.

"What're you going to do once we get back?" I asked.

"Ummm... Good question..." She gazed down while she thought. It didn't seem like she had anything planned.

That was when Camilo jumped in. "Oh... Actually, about that—Eizo, can you take her in at your place?"

"Me?" I asked.

"Yeah. Where is the safest place in the kingdom, do you think?"

"My forge, I suppose."

Unless there was a house on the peak of the mountains that surrounded the capital, there could be few locations more secure than a cabin in the middle of a notoriously dangerous forest protected by stranger-repelling magic. The number of such places in the kingdom—possibly, in this whole world—was undoubtedly limited. Never mind that my cabin was entirely built of wood.

"I don't have to if it'll be a bother," Helen said.

I shook my head. "It's no trouble. As long as you have no objections, you're welcome to stay."

"What about everyone else?"

"I don't think they'll mind."

The other four people + one creature in my family—Samya, Rike, Diana, Lidy, and finally Krul—were all open and friendly. They already knew Helen, who had previously stayed at our home, so I couldn't imagine them protesting against

her joining the family (even if it was only temporary).

“The family’s grown since you last stayed with us,” I said encouragingly. “It’s lively.”

“Really? Okay, then. I’ll stay with you,” Helen replied.

“It’s a done deal!” Camilo cheered, tying up the discussion.

After that, the atmosphere in the carriage turned warm and cheerful.

With that decided, I joined in the conversation about what was going on back in the city. I felt like we had been away for ages, but it had really only been around eight days. Nothing too alarming had happened during that time.

The revolution in the empire hadn’t yet made waves over here; not enough time had passed for the news to reach all corners of the kingdom. However, those with their ears to the ground had already gotten wind that the margrave was moving a unit of troops—small as it might be—into the empire, so the political scene was starting to liven up.

“We may see some excitement here in the kingdom, huh?” I remarked.

“Probably, though I doubt we’ll see a full-scale rebellion,” Camilo replied.

“Even so, many people fled the empire into the kingdom. Even if the revolution is quickly quashed, things aren’t going to settle down right away. The empire’s going to have its hands full for the foreseeable future. I wouldn’t be surprised if there are other countries that are planning the same thing the kingdom is.”

The uprising might have been technically another nation’s problem, but it’d happened close by. Regardless of whether it succeeded or failed, it was going to affect our kingdom.

Camilo might have already prepared all he needed to ride the waves and turn a profit. But me, I was just a regular old blacksmith. All I wanted was to live in peace.

“I pray I won’t be caught in the cross fire...” I said.

“I won’t let that happen,” declared Camilo, his tone unusually sharp. “I’m sure Marius feels the same.” Catalina gave a firm nod.

“Will we stop at the same town we stayed in on the way to the empire?” I

asked.

It would be difficult for us to return home by tonight. It'd already been past noon by the time we'd crossed the border. The sun will have certainly set before we reached home.

Having said that, I didn't think it'd be easy for us to lodge in the town either. We hadn't reached it yet, but it was the town closest to this side of the checkpoint. Anyone chasing us would no doubt stop to search there. If we were caught leisurely lounging about the town, all of our hard work to fly under the radar would go up in a puff of smoke.

"Preferably, no," said Camilo. "It would be best for us to go as far as we can from the border and then camp out for the night." His tone turned apologetic. "Sorry ladies, but I want to put as much distance between us and the inspection point as possible."

He was choosing to distance us from any pursuers while we had the chance, which would make it difficult to pinpoint our location.

I nodded. "Okay."

I looked over at Helen and Catalina. They both nodded too.

Setting Helen aside, I was surprised Catalina agreed to the plan so easily...but then I realized she had come all the way to the border by herself. Perhaps she had even been in Helen's profession before joining the Eimoor household.

Either way, I wasn't about to pry into a woman's past. If the two of them were on board, then I was content to leave the discussion at that.

We did as Camilo had suggested and passed by the town without stopping. Never mind that we had only visited it once—there still could be someone who remembered our faces, so we had little choice but to go around.

By the time we stopped for the night, the town was already a long way behind us. The sun had dyed the road and plains the same shade of gold. We stopped the carriage and set up camp.

I took out the pot while the other four gathered firewood. It had naturally fallen on me to make dinner, but then I thought about it for a moment. *Since*

Catalina is with us, should I have left the cooking to her?

I glanced at Catalina as I prepped the food then quickly looked away.

She might be a servant, but servants have their specialties too. Considering her role in the military expedition and the fact that she'd come here...her expertise probably lies somewhere other than cooking.

I “cooked” dinner, but really, all I did was throw together some packaged food and stew everything. Still, with my production cheats in effect, the meals I made were more delicious than that of your average traveler...at least I liked to think so.

The sun set.

Five of us settled around the campfire, which was the only source of light across the dark plains. I dished out the contents of the pot to Helen and Catalina, who were sitting next to me.

Dinner was a simple soup made with jerky, dehydrated vegetables, and beans, but with Camilo's permission, I used some salt and pepper for seasoning to elevate the dish.

“Here you go,” I said, passing a bowl to Helen.

“Thanks.”

I gave a second bowl to Catalina. “And here's your share.”

“Thank you.” Catalina took the bowl and brought it to her lips.

“Just as good as I remember, Eizo,” Helen complimented.

Catalina added, “This is my first time tasting your cooking. It's amazing that you made something this delicious camped out here as we are.”

“Right? I've been all over, but cooking of this caliber is a rare find,” gushed Helen.

I was happy—but embarrassed—to hear such earnest compliments.

“I just boiled things in a pot,” I said.

“Exactly. That's what I'm saying,” Catalina insisted. “Somehow, you made

such a flavorful dish with such simple techniques and ingredients. Your skills are unfair, Master Eizo.”

“I know, right. That’s what I’ve thought the whole time,” Helen agreed.

The two of them flatly shut down my attempts at humility to cover my embarrassment. Camilo and Franz said nothing, but watched our exchange with open grins—it was likely that they had *deliberately* chosen not to comment.

Catalina’s cheer was one thing, but I was glad to see that Helen was now in a much better mood too. Perhaps it was finally dawning on her that we were truly back in the kingdom.

That night, the two women slept while the three of us men took turns standing guard. Franz was first, I was second, and Camilo was last.

I was sleeping when Franz woke me up with a whispered “sorry.”

“Don’t worry, it’s no problem. All part of the rotation.”

I took my weapon with me to be safe and got up to take my turn on watch. When we’d been in the empire, I’d frequently seen travelers passing by during the night relying on torches to light their way. However, here in the kingdom, there wasn’t anyone like that.

Now that we were far away from the turmoil of the revolution, everything appeared to be perfectly normal. It felt like my head was having trouble keeping up.

My part in the affair was over, and there was nothing I could accomplish by worrying. However, the feeling that I should be able to help *somehow* just wouldn’t disappear.

I turned my face up to the sky. The short-tempered moon goddess bathed us with her blessing and the twinkling stars watched over us from above.

Chapter 9: Welcome

I was still on watch—sitting down with my legs crossed and staring up at the stars—when I heard the rustling sounds of someone getting up.

It was Helen. Since we didn't know what would happen during the night, she had gone to sleep with the wig still on, but it had slipped slightly. She removed it with a careless swipe of her hand.

"What's up?" I asked. "You couldn't sleep?"

"No, I just woke up all of a sudden," she answered.

In my previous life, I'd had plenty of experience with waking up in the middle of the night or not being able to sleep at all. At the time, it had been because of stress. That was a fate I didn't wish on Helen in the slightest.

She sat down next to me, holding her knees to her chest. Between the two of us, she was the taller one by far, but seated like this, our faces were pretty much at the same level.

I glanced in her direction. She was staring into the fire.

"Sorry to have caused so much trouble," she whispered.

"I want to say, 'don't worry about it,' but you're not going to let the matter rest so easily, are you? More than anyone else, the person blaming you the most is yourself." After all, in the forty years I'd spent in my old world, I had certainly inconvenienced others more than once or twice.



Helen buried her face in her knees.

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with needing more time to forgive yourself,” I continued. “Take as long as you want until you find an explanation you can swallow.”

“Okay...”

“And you’re welcome to stay with us while you’re searching for your answer,” I offered. “It’s no bother, even if it takes years. You became one of the family the moment we agreed that you would be living with us.”

“Thanks,” she said, though she didn’t look up.

I added another log to the fire. For a while, we sat together in silence. Only the cracking and popping of the branches broke the quiet of the night.

Another hour or so passed. I was just thinking about waking up Camilo for his turn on rotation when Helen spoke.

“Hey, Eizo.”

“Yeah?”

“Can I lie down next to you?” Helen fidgeted, rubbing her knees together.

It felt like I had just gained a new daughter. “I don’t mind. Only until Camilo and I change shifts though.”

“Sure.” At that, she lowered down onto her side.

I gently placed the wig back over her head. Before long, I heard her breathing deepen and even out.

I returned my gaze to the road.

A little under an hour later, I woke Helen up and had her return to where Catalina was sleeping. Then I roused Camilo so we could switch shifts.

I lay down and closed my eyes.

Family, huh? I don't mind that our family is growing, but why is it only women? It's not a big deal if it's all just a coincidence...but is it going to be like

this in the future too? All women, albeit with a full spread of races?

Could there be some kind of condition the Watchdog didn't tell me about? Or is there another explanation entirely...?

I lay there with my eyes closed, spinning my wheels. However, my thirty-year-old body and forty-year-old mind were exhausted, and I was soon whisked away into the realm of dreams.

The next morning, we awoke and prepared for our departure. For breakfast, all I did was heat up the leftovers from the previous night. Still, it was more than sufficient to fill our stomachs.

Breaking down camp was a task everyone in the party was accustomed to, including Catalina, so we were able to set off without delay. I was slightly curious about why Catalina was so used to camping but, well, best not to pry.

The horses pulled forward slowly. Impatience welled up within me at the thought that I was finally going home today, but if we pushed the horses to go too fast we would invite unwanted interest, which was counterproductive to our goal. I tried to keep a cool head and stay patient.

If Samya were here, she would've seen through me right away.

Slowly but surely, we proceeded. Around noon, the scenery began to look familiar.

We should be arriving in the city soon. From there, even if Helen and I were to walk along the road, we would be able to make it back to the cabin before dark. I could no longer sit still in my seat at the thought.

Camilo's next words to me were music to my ears.

"We're going straight to the capital, so we can drop you off at the forest entrance," he declared.

I don't know whether Camilo had sussed out my feelings, but I was more than grateful.

"Sorry to make you go through the trouble. I appreciate it."

Camilo waved off my thanks and winked. As usual, the wink was ill-suited to

his face.

We rode past the city and into the plains, an area that was practically my backyard. It began to feel more and more real—I was going home.

My family's faces popped up in my mind. It hadn't been too long since I'd come to this world, but the cabin I shared with them had already become a place I could return to.

At the entrance to the forest, Helen and I got off the carriage.

"Thanks for everything," I told Camilo, extending my hand.

He took it and shook it firmly. "Same here."

We were parting ways here for now. Though we'd be seeing each other in a mere week's time, I still felt a twinge of loneliness.

Helen and I waved, watching the others ride off. The two of us then headed into the Black Forest, which I knew like the back of my hand. Helen had come here several times in the past too, so she walked with surety.

The sun was beginning to set. Since our route was familiar, we proceeded smoothly through the forest without hesitation. I only had to make sure I didn't accidentally leave Helen behind.

Almost there...

Suddenly, a large shadow loomed up before us.

Helen moved to cover me, but I stopped her with a hand. The shadow came closer. And then—*slurp*—something licked my face and began to nuzzle my cheek with its head.

"Kulululululu."

"I'm back, Krul," I said.

"Kuluuu," she chirruped.

The shadow belonged to our beloved drake. She must have smelled me or otherwise sensed that I was close and had come to pick me up. After all, it wasn't as though we kept her leashed.

While I stroked her neck, she sniffed at Helen.

“It’s okay,” I reassured Krul. “This person is going to be part of our family starting today.”

Predictably, Krul swiped Helen’s face with her tongue from chin to forehead.

“Eeek! Wha—?” Helen shrieked. It must’ve been ticklish.

“She’s saying ‘welcome,’” I explained.

“Really?” Helen asked.

Needless to say, I didn’t *actually* understand what Krul was saying, but judging from her behavior, I could be sure that she didn’t disapprove of Helen.

“Go ahead. Try petting her,” I directed.

“A-All right...”

Helen stretched out a tentative hand. Krul lowered her head to make it easier for Helen to reach, and Helen began to pet Krul softly.

“*Kululululu*,” Krul trilled happily.

Startled, Helen froze. “D-Did I do something wrong?”

“Nah, she’s in a good mood,” I said. “You’re doing great.”

It was like how some people reacted the first time they heard a cat purring. Even if you knew that cats purred in theory, actually experiencing it could be shocking unless you knew about the sound in more detail—it was hard to imagine what a purr actually was and what to expect.

In Helen’s case, she was encountering a rare creature, so who knew how much prior knowledge she had?

“This little one is called Krul. She’s our family drake,” I explained. “Krul, this is Helen.”

“Nice to meetcha, Krul,”

“*Kulu*.” Krul rubbed Helen’s face with her head.

That was about it for introductions.

We set back out for our destination with me, Helen, and now Krul in a file.

That said, we only had a little ways left to go.

Soon, the cabin came into view.

Everyone else in the family was waiting for us outside. Samya and Diana must've noticed that I was coming.

I waved and hollered, "I'm home!" and received a chorus of "Welcome home!" and "You're back!" Hearing everyone's enthusiastic greetings, I finally felt like I had returned to where I belonged.

"Oh, that's right. Not to spring this all on you the moment I get back, but..."

I had intended to explain Helen's situation, but Samya cut me off. "We get it. We have eyes, you know?" It seemed that she had already guessed what I was going to say.

I looked around at everyone else and saw that they were all nodding as well.

Samya then asked, "What's with that thing on her head?"

"Aaah..."

It might've been better for Helen to take off the wig once we reached the forest, but I'd told her to keep it on—just in case—until we were safe at home.

Samya had a good sense of smell and had met Helen before, so she'd surely seen through the disguise in a heartbeat.

"Let's talk inside," I said.

"Oh, okay, that's probably best," Samya replied.

There was likely nothing at all to worry about, but it was better to take precautions to the end.

When I get inside...that's when I can finally relax.

In the cabin, I was greeted with the familiar scent of my home. I debated whether I should clean myself up, but in the end I decided that I wanted to talk first.

We gathered around the dining table. The sight of everyone seated together filled me with nostalgia.

But...this wasn't the time to indulge in sentimentality! There was business to attend to.

"You can take it off now, Helen," I said.

"Got it." She removed the wig to reveal her short red hair, instantly changing back into the Helen we all knew.

Only Lidy looked surprised. Come to think of it, Helen *was* a stranger to Lidy.

"I forgot. Lidy, this is your first time meeting, right? This is Helen."

Helen dipped her head in greeting from where she was sitting.

"My name is Lidy. At the moment, I'm residing at Forge Eizo for...certain reasons," Lidy said. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure's mine," Helen replied.

With introductions out of the way, Lidy didn't seem like she had any other concerns. Helen also didn't seem bothered by the fact that Lidy was an elf.

Looks like there won't be any hiccups!

"Okay, then, well... You see..." I mumbled, failing to form a coherent sentence.

Samya threw me a lifeline. "Let me guess. Helen's joining our family?"

"Yeeeah..." I admitted. "That's the long and short of it."

Hearing my confession, Samya puffed her chest out with pride. "I knew it!"

"As predicted," Diana added.

"Knowing Boss's personality, it was easy to see that things would turn out this way," said Rike.

I hadn't been seriously worried that they would object to the change, but I still felt relieved. The tension in my shoulders eased.

"See, I was right," Samya continued.

"Huh?" *What was she going on about?*

"While you were gone, the four of us expanded the cabin for this exact reason."

“We took care of the beds too,” Diana said.

“Though, we’ll need to buy additional bedding,” Lidy pointed out.

I had clued in on what they were talking about, but I was still struggling to follow the conversation.

“And, get this! We built not one, but *two* rooms!” Samya announced. She flashed a victory sign with such enthusiasm that I could almost hear the accompanying fanfare sound effect.

“You guys...”

I had to hand it to them. They were nothing if not trustworthy.

They’ve grown. Since when were they able to build rooms all by themselves?

I pushed down the mix of emotions choking me up. After all, I still had to talk to everyone about our plans for the upcoming weeks. “Helen got wrapped up in the turmoil in the empire, and she’s still in a bit of trouble. The safest place in the kingdom is—”

“Here, right?” Diana finished.

Even Diana was conscious of that fact, huh?

Rike nodded. “The wolves roaming around here act as natural guards, and the entire forest is full of twists and turns. It’s practically a labyrinth.”

“Not to mention the stranger-repelling magic cast over the house,” Lidy said, adding yet another argument in favor of the cabin’s security. “The average human wouldn’t even be able to come close.”

Only Samya looked puzzled. Since she’d lived her whole life here, the commonly accepted idea that the Black Forest was dangerous just didn’t ring true to her.

“Anyhow, that’s the situation, so Helen will be staying with us for the time being,” I finished.

“What’s she gonna do during our trips to the city?” Samya asked.

Do we take her with us? We could always leave her behind...but I don’t want to if we can help it. God forbid something happen to her while we’re gone—

there'd be no way for us to help. That's a turn of events I'm determined to avoid.

"We'll all go, but we'll keep an eye on the situation," I decided. "Helen can wear the wig for now on the way to and from the city. When the dust settles in the empire, we can try going without it."

"You sure?"

Bringing Helen with us naturally increased the risk that she would be found by anyone chasing after her. At the very least, she would be witnessed going around in her wig.

"It'll probably be fine," I mused. "The people most likely to recognize Helen are the guards stationed at the empire's border. In fact, the two of us sticking together might actually work in our favor, since we told the guards we were married."

At my last words, Diana and Samya both leaped out of their seats. Rike and Lidy were fidgeting where they sat as well.

What in the world? Where's the fire?

I ignored everyone's reactions and continued speaking. "Of course, it's just a story we fed. It's not like we turned in any paperwork, you know. That means that our cover will be blown right away if someone looks into it."

Diana and Samya sat back down. I was curious about the obvious relief in their expressions, but since they'd calmed down, I decided to leave the issue alone.

"Like we said earlier, we predicted this was going to happen," Diana said in a steady voice. Then, she turned to Helen. "You're welcome to stay as long as you want."

"Don't sweat it. You're already one of the family," Samya remarked casually.

Hey, now. If you keep rocking on your chair like that, you're going to fall.

Rike added, "You'll have your own room too."

"You're not just a guest," Lidy finished.

Helen listened to everything they said with her face turned down.

“Thanks... Really, thank you...” she muttered.

I patted her gently on the shoulder.

With that decided, the only pressing thing left to do was eat!

Before I started cooking, I first dusted off from my travels. I set aside my baggage—the unpacking could wait until tomorrow—wiped myself down with a wet cloth, and changed into comfortable clothing.

Having cleaned myself up in short order, I left my room and took up my post in front of the stove.

The soup’s already done. Why don’t I grill up some boar meat, yakiniku-style?

The boar was apparently a spoil of one of the huntresses’ latest outings.

It had been a while since the last time I’d stood in front of a stove. Luckily, a week plus change wasn’t long enough for my muscles to forget the process. With my cheats also working for me, I was able to finish all the prep without trouble.

I sliced the boar thin and kept the seasoning simple with just a splash of brandy and a dash of spices. The dish wasn’t anything fancy, but it was always a hit with the family.

Helen came out of the guest room right as I finished cooking dinner. Since there wasn’t any bedding in the new rooms Samya and the gang had built, we had no choice but to put her up in the guest room for now.

She had borrowed clothing from Diana, who was the tallest of the women in the house. Nonetheless, Helen had a few inches on me even, so much of the clothing was still too small. The hems fell short of her wrists and ankles, a fact which she was apparently well aware of, judging by her restlessness.

“I-I don’t look weird, do I?” Helen asked.

Diana was the daughter of a comital family, so even her everyday clothes were ornate compared to normal standards.

Regardless of what people from this world thought about Helen wearing Diana’s clothes (which were also a size too small), from the lens of someone who had lived on Earth, I didn’t think she looked strange at all.

I told her so directly. “Not really, no? I think it suits you.”

Helen blushed fiercely at my comment and then threw herself into a chair at the dining table.

Everyone else came out and sat down too. I poured cups of wine and passed them around. Once everyone had a cup, we raised them and cheered, our voices as one, “Welcome to Forge Eizo, Helen!”

Together, we ate and drank wine. There was one obvious candidate for tonight’s dinner conversation: I wanted to know what everyone had been up to while I’d been away.

Life here at the cabin had continued on normally, though I’d expected as much. However, Krul had been sullen because the trips to the city had been put on hold and I hadn’t been home.

Otherwise, it had been business as usual. The biggest development was that they had unanimously agreed that I would bring home Helen (“Without a shadow of a doubt!”) and had decided to build the new rooms to prepare.

Samya said that the forge work had slowed down while I was away, but Rike had taken the helm to ensure everything ran smoothly. The construction hadn’t been too difficult either, since everyone already had experience.

“Krul was a big help!” Diana added. Our resident drake had aided in hauling and lifting the wood. In other words, she’d acted as a substitute for heavy machinery. Thanks to her, they’d finished construction faster than expected.

“Hmmm, it’d be nice to give her a reward,” I remarked.

“Whaddya think would make her happy?” Samya asked.

I would’ve given special treats to a typical animal, but Krul could live off magic and hardly ever needed any food.

What else? Something to play with? She already had plenty of fun pulling the mini cart around and was just as content playing by herself as with us, so...

“All I can think of is taking her for a trip to the city,” Rike said.

“True,” I replied simply. I took some more time to think.

Rike had reported that they'd forged more than enough entry-level models while I was away. Tomorrow...was a tad too soon to make a delivery to Camilo, but we could go the day after that and bring Krul along for the ride. She would be delighted by the trip.

I hadn't made any of the blades this time around, but that shouldn't be a big deal—we had enough coppers in our pocket. Camilo would have a decreased selection to sell, but he'd be able to make do for a week or so. Besides, this last week, we had skipped our normal delivery entirely, and on top of that, the boss man himself had been away.

Camilo was unusually hardworking for the proprietor of a somewhat renowned store. That diligence was also the reason for his business's continued success though. His skills were indisputable. It was precisely because I had faith in his business savvy that I had chosen to leave my goods in his capable hands.

As I listened to everyone talk about what had happened around the house, we finished eating. The others wanted to hear my stories too, so we decided to keep chatting after tidying up.

I recounted the tales of my comings and goings, skipping over Camilo's visit to the brothel out of a certain sense of foreboding. I gave a simple account, but even so the others listened to my story about Helen's rescue and the upheaval from the revolution with bated breath, hanging on to my every word.

"I didn't know you weathered so much hardship," Diana said to Helen, her voice thick with tears. "You can stay with us as long as you want."

The words "crybaby" and "mother hen" immediately popped into my head. Not that I didn't understand how she felt.

Helen responded with a muted, "R-Right..."

"I heard that a lot of dwarves live in the empire," I said, changing the subject. "Will your family's forge be affected, Rike?"

"Our forge is in the kingdom, so everyone should be fine," she explained. "It's located near a border, but to the republic, not to the empire."

"I see. So, no problems at the moment, right?"

The elves from Lidy's village had scattered to different regions, but I knew for sure that they'd remained within the kingdom. And Samya's family...went without saying.

Hearing all that, I deduced that no one in my family should be ensnared by the pandemonium in the empire...as long as you discounted me and Helen. We'd been steeped in that chaos already.

Without any preamble, Samya asked, "Come to think of it, why were you captured in the first place, Helen?"

For an instant, time stopped.

Naturally, we were all curious, but everyone besides Samya had grasped that it was a tactless question to ask so soon after the rescue.

"H-Hold on a sec..." I said.

I meant to rebuke Samya, but Helen cut in instead. "No, it's okay. I want you all to know."

Then, in fits and spurts, she told us the full story from start to end.

"I'd just finished a job near the border of the demon kingdom," Helen narrated, "when I got a request to patrol the empire border and clean up some bandits terrorizing the area."

The job near the demon kingdom that she was alluding to was likely the same one that'd spurred Nilda to pay us a visit.

"Me and my fellows stayed in a village by the border. The folk there welcomed us with open arms. The bandits had hassled them too, see?"

"Do you always work in a team?" I asked.

"Course. Doing what I do alone or in a pair is out of the question. Anyway, it's not like I'm a member of a mercenary guild. We throw together a new team job-to-job."

We had been sent into the empire to rescue Helen and only Helen. If she'd been working in a team, could there have been other people that had been captured?

“So, the villagers told me where they thought the bandits were hiding. When I went to scout out the place, I stumbled upon a gang of peculiar people.”

“Peculiar?”

“Yeah. They were dressed all nicely and carrying impressive weapons. They looked too wealthy to be a bandit operation in the middle of nowhere. I remember thinking ‘no freaking way.’ It was a big group too.”

Helen took a breath. Everyone stayed silent, absorbed in Helen’s tale.

“Coming off the high of the last job, I must’ve let down my guard. It was hardly my first time dealing with bandits either. Someone got the jump on me from behind and took me captive. They knew their stuff. Though, if I’d been looking behind me, I might’ve been able to cut them down and run.”

So...Helen hadn’t lost in a face-to-face fight after all. Good. It would’ve been a pain if this world were rife with people who had the skills to best Helen.

Helen glanced at Diana, who had swallowed heavily at the part where Helen was captured, but nonetheless continued her story. “They confiscated my weapons, and their boss—that’s what he looked like to me, at least—demanded, ‘Did you hear anything?’ I shook my head no. I’d only just stumbled on their camp and all, but, aaah, they didn’t believe me.”

“Anyone would’ve said ‘no’ in that situation whether they’d been listening or not,” I said.

Helen nodded firmly in agreement. “Honestly, I wouldn’t have believed me either. They’d clearly seen me watching them. From there, they squirreled me into the empire.”

“Did they do anything to you?” Diana asked with an anxious expression.

Helen replied nonchalantly. “They interrogated me about what I heard...but nothing too nasty.”

There hadn’t been any obvious wounds on her body when I’d found her. Of course, considering her haggard appearance, she hadn’t exactly been given the royal treatment either.

“It’s over now. You can rest easy,” I said.

“Thanks.” Helen gave a wide grin. “I plan to do just that.”

And so, our debriefing session came to an end.

Everyone returned to their own rooms (or the guest room, in Helen’s case) in groups of two or three. I went back to mine as well.

It felt amazing to lie in my bed for the first time in several days. I had the others to thank for making it for me.

Nevertheless, on the inside, I was being eaten up by worry. *Why was Helen the only one captured? Who were the people who took her?* I just couldn’t make sense of it. I hoped that one day the truth would come to light.

As I fretted, I surrendered the battle against my drowsiness and fell asleep.

###

We didn’t get answers the next day. To be honest, we didn’t do much of anything—the family mostly just lounged around. I, however, still made sure to fetch water at the lake (with Krul, of course), cook our meals, and play with Krul.

The truth about the situation did come to us though...the day after that. And from a source outside the family.

After our morning chores, we loaded our wares and belongings onto our cart and set off toward the city. I felt like it’d been forever since our last trip, but in reality, it hadn’t even been a month.

This was Helen’s first time riding in the cart with Krul at the head. We traveled fast, the ride was smooth, and Helen (with the wig firmly in place) was in a buoyant mood.

“Drakes sure are something else!” she whooped.

Diana puffed up with pride. “I know, right?” She was like a mother who was excited over a compliment about her beloved daughter. I guess that wasn’t so far from the truth...

“The rocking of this cart reminds me of the ride in Camilo’s carriage,” Helen remarked. “It’s gentle.”

“Camilo modeled the mechanism in his carriage off this cart,” I explained.

“Really? You really are a jack-of-all-trades, Eizo.”

“Not *all* trades. I do what I can.”

Part of me was thinking, *Even rescue missions are a piece of cake for me, blacksmith extraordinaire!* But there were also things I couldn't do. For example, I could never take command in a battle.

My skills only covered things I could do with my own hands.

Our drake-drawn cart passed through the leisurely scenery bordering the road and, before long, we had reached the city. The usual guard was at the gate, and we exchanged greetings. Incidentally, since it would've been troublesome if the guard had recognized Helen, she hid when we arrived at the checkpoint. However, the guard let us through without any thorough questioning.

Once through, we arrive at Camilo's in short order. We handed Krul over to the care of the staff and went up to the conference area. The room was spacious, so even though there were more of us now, it didn't feel cramped.

I felt as if I had been seen through...but that was probably just paranoia speaking.

We had been waiting for a short while when, as expected, Camilo and the head clerk came into the room. But something *was* different.

One more person—someone whose face I knew very well—filed in after the first two.

“Good to see you, Eizo. It's been a long time since we last met.”

The third person, make no mistake, was none other than Count Eimoor himself.

Without thinking, I stood up. “Marius...!”

I didn't know if he'd come to the city simply because he had the time, or if this was an official business trip as the ruler of the region. Regardless, he wasn't someone who could casually spend a long time away from the capital, so I was genuinely surprised to see him.

“What in the world are you doing here?” I asked, not bothering to hide my shock.

Marius flashed his usual roguish grin. “I thought I’d share what I know.”

“You don’t say.”

“Best for me to stay in your good graces,” Marius said. “Besides that, you’re an important friend.”

He made his declaration unabashedly...though, to reassure me, he’d probably slipped in the hint that he benefited from this interaction. There were many people—particularly in the world of the nobility that Marius was ensconced in—who refused to trust in forthright favors.

“I’ll gladly accept your kindness,” I said, thanking him genuinely.

“I’m happy to hear you say that.”

Marius gestured for us to sit, so we did. He sat down opposite us. “I can only tell you what I know from my investigations,” he said as a preamble.

Then, he settled in to tell his story.

“In short, the empire—that is to say, the emperor—knew about the revolution all along,” Marius explained.

“He did?” I asked. “He knew it was going to happen?”

“Yes. And he planned to use it to his advantage. He wanted to set an example. In fact, as of right now, the revolution might’ve already been squashed.”

“Then, why bother capturing Helen?” I wondered.

“Well, he didn’t want it getting out that he *knew*. If the news had leaked, the rebels wouldn’t have acted, see? And her capture was kept a secret for that very reason.”

Helen hadn’t overheard anything from her captors, but regardless, they must have been people with secret knowledge about the revolution. And, like Helen herself had admitted, her captors couldn’t be sure how much she’d found out. However, if they *had* gotten rid of her, there was a chance that the cover-up could’ve been sloppy, and that might’ve attracted unwanted attention. So, to

avoid that risk, they'd let her live.

But wait. That means...

"You're saying that Helen would've been fine...whether we'd gone in to save her or not?" I asked.

Marius shook his head. "No, that's not the case. Once the revolution was underway, Helen would have ceased to be a person of interest. At that point, it would have no longer mattered whether she was dead or alive."

All the members of Forge Eizo, including yours truly, gulped at Marius's ominous declaration.

Marius wet his lips with a sip of his tea and continued. "The empire still wouldn't want anyone to know that they had prior intel about the revolution. However, once the rebels made a move, it wouldn't have seemed out of place for Helen to die. It was a revolt after all, so her death would've been written off as a casualty of the ensuing turmoil."

"So, actually, we made it in just the nick of time."

"Yeah."

"And from what you're saying, I gather it's too soon to say that Helen's safe."

"Right again," Marius said with a firm nod. "You should continue to take precautions for the time being, like you did today."

It wasn't as if there were a court system here that could mandate an autopsy for an untimely death. The dead here could spill no secrets. This world did have magic, but only the nobility (at least, as far as humans were concerned) had any real access—it was highly unlikely that the right conclusions about her hypothetical death would've been drawn.

A person walking around freely, knowing what Helen had potentially known, would've surely been a thorn in the empire's side. It was no wonder they'd tried to tie up that loose end.

Of course, there'd been no reason or need for *us* to help relieve the empire of that particular worry.

I looked over at Helen. Her face was turned down.

She shouldn't have to torment herself over this, I was thinking, but then, Diana laid a hand on Helen's shoulder and started murmuring to her.

I left Diana to comfort Helen and turned my focus back to Marius.

"So the empire knew about the revolution—wasn't that fact a threat to the margrave's plan?" I asked. "He's making moves to carve out a piece of territory for the kingdom, right? What if he'd been heading straight into an ambush?"

"About that..." Marius heaved a great sigh.

What did that old man of a patron get himself into this time?

"There's actually another layer behind that too."

"What?" I blurted, failing to hide my surprise.

Exactly how many times have I been shocked since Marius started speaking?

"Long story short, the land the margrave is planning to seize...has actually already been given to us by the empire. We would've gotten it...even if we hadn't done anything."

"Then, why bother...?"

"The surrender of land would be seen as a huge failure on the empire's part, even if the kingdom had given something in exchange. Instead, the emperor plans to hang all the blame for the loss on the rebel leaders. 'The empire's forces were tied up by the uprising. If only the uprising hadn't happened...' You see?"

"But the empire will still be losing territory," I pointed out.

"From their perspective, it's an inconvenient portion of land, too far away from the center of the empire to be overseen. The emperor judged that there was no benefit to holding onto it," Marius explained. "Therefore, the empire won't resist the takeover. Any threats will just be bluff and bluster."

The unspoken implication behind Marius's words was that the land was a boon to the kingdom in some way. Marius hadn't told me what exactly the benefit was...though I guess that meant it was better for me not to know.

The kingdom must have given the empire something in exchange...but what?

“The emperor plans to quash the revolution, round up all the rebels in one go, and use the loss of the land as an excuse to build up the military. Then, after taking the time to reflect on the revolution, he’ll establish a new course of rule.”

“The reflection is just lip service, right?”

Marius nodded easily. “Yeah, well, it’s a calculated demonstration to show that the empire isn’t as much of a dictatorship as it’s rumored to be.”

So, the whole affair with the revolution turned out to be nothing but a farce from start to end. Helen’s involvement had been the only wrench in the works. In such a carefully orchestrated charade, Helen, who might’ve been able to spill the beans on the whole thing, would’ve been a considerable threat to the empire.

Hm? Wait a sec...? Then, to begin with...

“Could it be? The one who—”

But Marius cut me off before I could say my conjecture. “Hold it right there, Eizo.”

If my theory was right, it would explain everything—from what payment the kingdom had offered, to why *Marius* had known about Helen’s capture...even though the empire’s grip on its information security should have been airtight.

The fact that Marius had found out...meant that the emperor never had any real plans to murder Helen. However, considering everything that was still currently in play, the empire couldn’t simply give up on chasing Helen either, so she wasn’t quite in the clear just yet.

There was even a chance that the bulk weapons order I’d forged for the margrave’s “campaign” had been used to suppress the revolutionaries—that was a possibility I couldn’t discount.

Really...everything had been a part of an elaborate play.

I could tell myself I wasn’t accountable for anything...but it wouldn’t be a very convincing argument.

Marius must’ve sensed what I was thinking because he lowered his head.

“This is all on me. Had I noticed everything sooner, I could’ve come up with some way to stop it.”

Camilo, who’d been silent up until now, bowed as well. “Let me apologize too. I didn’t think you would end up so involved.”

“No use crying over spilled milk, especially if there wasn’t anything the two of you could do. Don’t worry about it. Raise your heads, please.” Those were my genuine feelings. Anything that was beyond the power of Marius and Camilo was sure to be impossible for the likes of me.

He had simply been more cunning. I still had thoughts and misgivings about the whole ploy, but *he* must’ve had *his* reasons. If *his* actions had incurred the wrath of the rest of the world, or had sparked a great war, I would’ve used everything in my power to prevent that disorder. However, that didn’t seem to be the case, so there was no reason for me to go out of my way to disrupt *his* plans.

“In any case, we did manage to rescue Helen,” I said.

I glanced at her. She seemed to have regained her cool and was now whispering with Diana and Samya. I was happy to see her back on her feet.

Appearance-wise, I was already thirty years old, and on the inside, I was a decade older. I was well past the age of understanding how to best cheer up a young woman...

“Thanks for being so understanding,” Marius said.

I waved off his gratitude.

That was the end of the discussion about the revolution. From then on, we returned to our regularly scheduled programming.

I let Camilo know what we were looking to stock up on. The head clerk acknowledged our order with a nod and exited as usual.

Next was catching up—this was the first time in a long while that Marius and Diana had been able to chat as brother and sister. They talked about the servants’ situations and other such topics.

The rest of us spoke with Camilo about goings-on in the city, but Camilo had

only just returned two days ago, so he didn't have much information. The city was situated far from the kingdom's border, so the ripples from the hubbub in the empire had yet to make waves here.

After we finished what we needed to do and got paid, we decided to head home.

Just as I was about to leave the conference room, Camilo stopped me. "Eizo, do you have a minute?"

I told everyone else to go on ahead, which left me and Camilo alone in the room.

"What's up?" I asked. "Did something happen?"

"No, not exactly...but I thought it best to tell you..." Contrary to his words, he seemed hesitant to speak.

"You don't have to say anything you don't want to. There are plenty of things in this world that are best left in the dark."

"No, I want you to know. There's a chance it could give you heartache later on, so it's better for you to know." He spoke firmly, and it was the opposite of his reluctance from a second ago. His stare was filled with determination.

"Helen is the margrave's illegitimate daughter."

Somewhere inside me, I had suspected that might be the case, but the revelation was still a shocking blow.

"Is that why he asked you to extract her?" I asked.

"Yeah."

Helen might have been a stellar fighter, but it wasn't as if she was a knight of the kingdom. Normally, the news that one lone mercenary had been captured wouldn't have warranted a rescue unit. The explanation behind that mystery had finally been revealed.

"She told me before that her dad was a farrier," I said. "Was that man entrusted with her care?"

"Immediately after she was born. The margrave couldn't keep her by his side."

“What about her mother?”

“Passed away soon after giving birth. Helen’s not related to either of her parents by blood.”

“Then, Helen...?”

“Doesn’t know. And don’t you tell her, got it?”

I shrugged. “My lips are sealed.”

The time might come when she’d have to find out the truth, but even I could tell that today wasn’t the day. If Helen was the daughter of that bold and openhearted old man, then it made sense why her personality was the way it was. And, to have orchestrated such a rescue mission...he had a sensitive side, just like Helen. They really were father and daughter.

Helen had surely inherited her talent with a sword from her father. I was sure that the margrave was delighted watching over his daughter’s growth and efforts. He was a member of the nobility, but I certainly didn’t hate that soft side of him.

“Now that I know...if the margrave stirs up trouble in the capital, it’ll be hard for me to stay out of it. Am I right?”

“My apologies.” Camilo looked truly regretful. He had gone to great lengths to keep me away from any struggles. There must have been some complications for him to bring me into the fold.

However, I was simply grateful that he had shared information about my family, and I wasn’t going to fault him if that information eventually brought danger down on my head.

“Don’t worry about it,” I reassured him. “We’re in this together, rain or shine.”

“Thanks, Eizo.”

Camilo’s demeanor raised questions in my head, but I was hesitant to pry into his circumstances. I patted him on the shoulder and exited the room.

I went outside to find that the others had already finished the preparations for departure. Krul trilled as if to say, “You’re not done yet?” and urged me to

hurry up.

This kid sure loves pulling things around.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” I said and climbed into the cart. Everyone else was already waiting, and the supplies were tied down in the back too.

“All right, let’s get going,” Rike said.

“Great.”

Rike flicked the reins. Krul chirruped and walked forward.

The city streets were boisterous as usual. Helen stared vacantly out at the crowds, just like she had done on the way to Camilo’s

“If you’re yearning to return to the mercenary life, you’re free to go whenever you like,” I told her.

However, Helen shook her head fiercely. “I don’t want that yet.”

“Really? Well, you’re welcome to stay with us however long you want. No need to be considerate for our sake.”

Helen nodded without protest.

I reclined in my seat and closed my eyes to think.

What kinds of things should I make next? What techniques can I use? First, I have to replace Helen’s shortswords. Then, perhaps...a bow? She might want to join in on the hunts.

I can’t forget about Camilo’s standing order either. There’s plenty of work to be done.

But, there was no need to rush. We could take our time and go at our own pace. We had plenty of time, and we’d been working too hard up until now. After all, my ultimate goal was a slow life.

I opened my eyes.

The others were chatting freely amongst themselves. Helen and Diana had become fast friends and were talking up a storm. Samya was talking with Lidy, who was miming drawing a bow; they must have been talking about how to use an elven bow. Rike was steering the cart, and it was as if she were conversing

with Krul through the reins.

A gentle atmosphere enveloped us.

Finally, we could return to our normal days of quiet and peace.

Epilogue: Far into the Future

Sometime after I first started investigating Eizo Tanya, I found myself making a visit to the empire. Rike and Lidy, two residents of his forge, had both attested that he'd once ventured there—they told me to check it out for myself.

Everywhere in the empire, there were signs of maintenance and new construction projects that had been sponsored by the generosity of the previous emperor. Thanks to the advancements, the people filling the streets were all wearing smiles.

The imperial order covered developments for every kind of public institution, and I heard that the town library was suitably impressive as well. So, I decided that would be the first stop on my quest for resources.

True to its reputation, the library hosted a vast collection of books and documents of high quality. The collection had flourished under the previous emperor's direction.

I began my search, but frustratingly, I found the information I was seeking to be elusive. That was when I chanced upon an elder who was intimately familiar with the town's history. I struck up a conversation with him posthaste.

"All of that happened here?"

"Yes. For reasons unknown, documents which should have been carefully preserved have been lost to the wind," he replied. "I don't know anything more detailed than that."

According to this man, Eizo had crossed paths with this town during—get this—a failed attempt at a revolution in the empire. A rebellion had broken out here, but ultimately, it'd been quickly suppressed and had ended in failure.

The emperor at the time had deeply regretted that his decrees had planted the seeds of the revolution, so he'd pledged himself to a benevolent rule thereafter. Such were the broad strokes of what was, at this point, half historical account and half legend.

Recent sources found in the empire suggested that the emperor had known about the rebellion beforehand, and he had secretly hired a renowned mercenary to persuade or assassinate the rebel leaders.

What had happened to that mercenary was unknown, but apparently they had been captured by the rebel forces.

That was when Eizo appeared on the scene and single-handedly disposed of several units of revolutionaries in the blink of an eye, all to rescue the mercenary.

Possibly.

Technically, the identity of the mysterious man who crushed the rebel troops remains undetermined.

Upon piecing together information from several different accounts, I was able to ascertain that the outbreak of the uprising coincided perfectly with the period Eizo had supposedly visited the empire. He had entered the empire after the mercenary but before the revolution had been quashed...or so it seemed.

Put another way, there was only one person whose background was mostly unknown but who also fit all the criteria to be the rescuer.

That was why I'd been convinced for a time that my suspicions were true.

But all too soon, my hypothesis was disproved. According to every source and testimony, Eizo was "nothing more than a blacksmith." I heard the line so many times that I grew sick of it. I had, for a time, suspected that the strong emphasis on his trade was a cover, but I found no proof to back up my theory.

Therefore, Eizo's combat ability should've been no more than what one would expect of a blacksmith—at best, skills akin to an average citizen.

In the end, I concluded that the mysterious man (or woman) who had rescued the mercenary wasn't Eizo after all.

I pray that someday, a new source will come to light and overturn this last theory. That is a day I shall welcome with open arms.

The Story of How We Met VI: A Quiet Day as Usual

Athena's day started early. She had to prep the food in order to be ready when the customers—few as they were—came in.

She knocked tasks off her list one after another, bringing in vegetables and dried meat that an acquaintance had left for her (which she'd paid for, of course) and then cutting up ingredients needed for the dishes on the menu today.

The knife flashed as she chopped, and the food changed shape seamlessly as if it were part of a dance. She divided ingredients into ones that would be grilled and ones that would be stewed, then cut them to the appropriate sizes. Then, she seasoned everything with a simple mix of salt and spices. The leftover ends—bits of the vegetables and meat—she threw into a pot, ready to become soup. Finally, she tasted everything.

Athena went through the same routine every day; she could probably do it with her eyes closed.

Once she was finished, she grinned. "Good. Stellar work as always, just great," she said to herself. She was ready to welcome the customers with dishes that were sure to satisfy their taste buds.

It was almost time to open. She slapped her hands to her face to pump herself up and then began to tidy up the dining hall.

Today was surely going to be another typical day.

"Welcome!"

It was early afternoon. One of her regulars, an elderly woman from the neighborhood, had just walked into the shop. She usually dropped by around this time.

"You're full of energy as usual, Athena," she said.

Athena smiled. "That's my only redeeming feature."

They'd had this exchange many times before, but Athena realized that a part of her felt at ease in the familiarity of it all.

Besides the elderly woman, a few other people normally stopped by at this time of day.

Another regular walked in.

"Welcome," Athena greeted.

"I'll have the usual," the customer said.

"Yes, yes. You know, I wouldn't mind if you ordered something more expensive once in a while."

"If only I made that kind of money," he replied wryly.

"I hear that," Athena said with a smile.

She brought out his usual dishes and returned to the kitchen. After that, she sat down in a chair and sighed.

Athena's parents had died from sickness. She'd inherited The Drinking Goose and had been running it by herself ever since. Her parents had been good folk. Over and over, her dad used to say, "I run this eatery because I want to serve delicious food to everyone." Her mom had supported him, always with a gentle smile.

One day, if she ever got married, Athena hoped to have the kind of relationship her parents once had. To her, they were the epitome of an ideal couple, and she was terribly proud of them.

Athena used to sit in a chair, just as she was now, watching her parents work side by side in the kitchen.

Thanks to her talent for cooking and support from people in the neighborhood, she'd managed to keep the shop running. But new patrons weren't coming in, and those from the neighborhood were decreasing one by one.

These days, she could count the number of customers she saw in a day.

“Well, it’s not as if I hate peace and quiet,” Athena mumbled to herself in the silent kitchen.

She traced the patterns on the table with a finger. Its surface was littered with scratches and damage...with history and memories.

“Things are going to get hard from here on out...”

Regardless of the memories she had, she wouldn’t be able to keep the store open if she couldn’t make money.

“But there’s nothing I can do with things as they are.”

Athena smiled bitterly to herself. If only something *different* would happen to save her from her predicament. She couldn’t help but think such fanciful thoughts.

“No, stop it. You’ve got to keep working like usual,” she chided herself.

Athena stood up and stretched with a groan.

At that moment, she heard the sound of the front door opening. Athena smiled wryly again when she realized that the sound had reached the kitchen only because the eatery was so quiet.

At that, she waltzed out to the front to greet her new customers—a man in his thirties accompanied by a dwarven lady.

Afterword

Greetings. This is the fourth time we are meeting like this. I am Tamamaru, a moonlight writer now in my forties.

I am extremely thankful for the fruition of this fourth volume. This book includes stories that are relatively seismic in nature for this author's humble work. I had to hold off on including the successive chapters from the web novel and contemplated what to do instead.

Those of you who have finished the volume already know (and dear readers who like to start reading from the afterword—I urge you to start at the beginning first and then come back to me), but I have inserted several original chapters which were never published in the web novel.

In the afterword for volume three, I included something like “writing new stories for the novelization is beyond me.” But here I am, casually going back on my word. There are even two new characters who take the stage in this volume.

I had thought to myself, “there’s always been other beastfolk besides Samya,” but come to think of it, I’d never introduced any others. Hence, the wolf-type beastfolk, Jolanda, was born.

She’s half-wolf because originally, I had planned to introduce a new family dynamic. I ended up giving up on that idea for the moment, so she had to take on a new role. As for the change to the family dynamic, I’m leaving it as something to relish in future volumes.

I felt it was sad that Eizo only had one friend in the city, Camilo. So, it was time to introduce a longtime denizen (to use an old-fashioned word), who would be able to get involved in plots involving the city. (Camilo moved into the city, you see? Granted, Eizo *is* in tight with the ruler of the city, Marius, so that’s as big of an advantage as any.) The result of all my thinking was the proprietress of a city eatery—Athena.

Neither Jolanda nor Athena have joined the Forge Eizo family, but they’re

both now neighbors, so to speak. I hope to leverage their stories from here on out. By the way, I don't plan to write them into the web novel, so I hope you will all enjoy their appearances in the novels.

Moving on. The second half of the volume was the "seismic" developments, or the Revolution in the Empire arc.

To be honest, I hadn't planned for Helen to join the family. She was supposed to be an outside observer who popped in to visit from time to time, playing the role of a main spin-off character.

For the cast, I was looking for a character whose job took them all around the region, and I also wanted someone who had a relationship with Eizo where he could potentially spontaneously come to their rescue. This ultimately came down to Helen or Camilo...but who wants to read about an old geezer being held captive? Thus, I had Helen step up to bat.

I decided that the mission would come from either Marius or the margrave, but it might have been better to have someone unknown make the request. It's a little...*you know*...for those two to call on Eizo for any given opportunity, and for me to overuse them as well.

Helen was at quite the disadvantage this time, but that was part of my initial plan. I wanted her to play the role of the maiden, or rather, I thought it would be good to show her womanly side.

For those readers who own the first volume, I think you'll understand the appeal if you go back and read the volume again. I welcome you to do so. For those of you who don't...why not pick up the volume and check it out for yourself?

Anyway, as I touched on earlier, Jolanda's perspective shows how the Eizo family appears to an inhabitant of the Black Forest, and Athena gives perspective as a citizen of the city.

Marius and the margrave represent the kingdom's aristocrats. As for how Forge Eizo appears to people living in the capital and the kingdom's internal regions, you'll find that out soon enough...probably.

By the way, the mysterious person who's been showing up every volume,

shadowing Eizo's footsteps and collecting information, is a journalist and a biographer.

He's chasing after the elusive blacksmith who shows his face here and there throughout the gaps of history. However, as the readers of the third volume's epilogue know, *her* handiwork has had a lingering effect (or has borne fruit), so our dear journalist is having a tough time producing results. Hopefully, one day, he will make a breakthrough.

All right, now, between the third and fourth volumes, the first volume of the comic has been published. Himori Yoshi-sensei is in charge of the adaptation. It was terribly popular, with a reissue confirmed as soon as it was published. Readers of the novelization will be able to enjoy both familiar and brand-new delights in the comic. That I promise you, as the work's original author. Please give it a try. Pardon me for being *that* author that seizes any PR opportunity (here I am, patting myself on the back).

Lastly, the acknowledgments. Thank you, Kinta-sensei, as always for the stunning illustrations. Jolanda and Athena have been rendered beautifully and effortlessly. I am deeply grateful for your work, and I always look forward to seeing the drafts of the illustrations. Thank you very much.

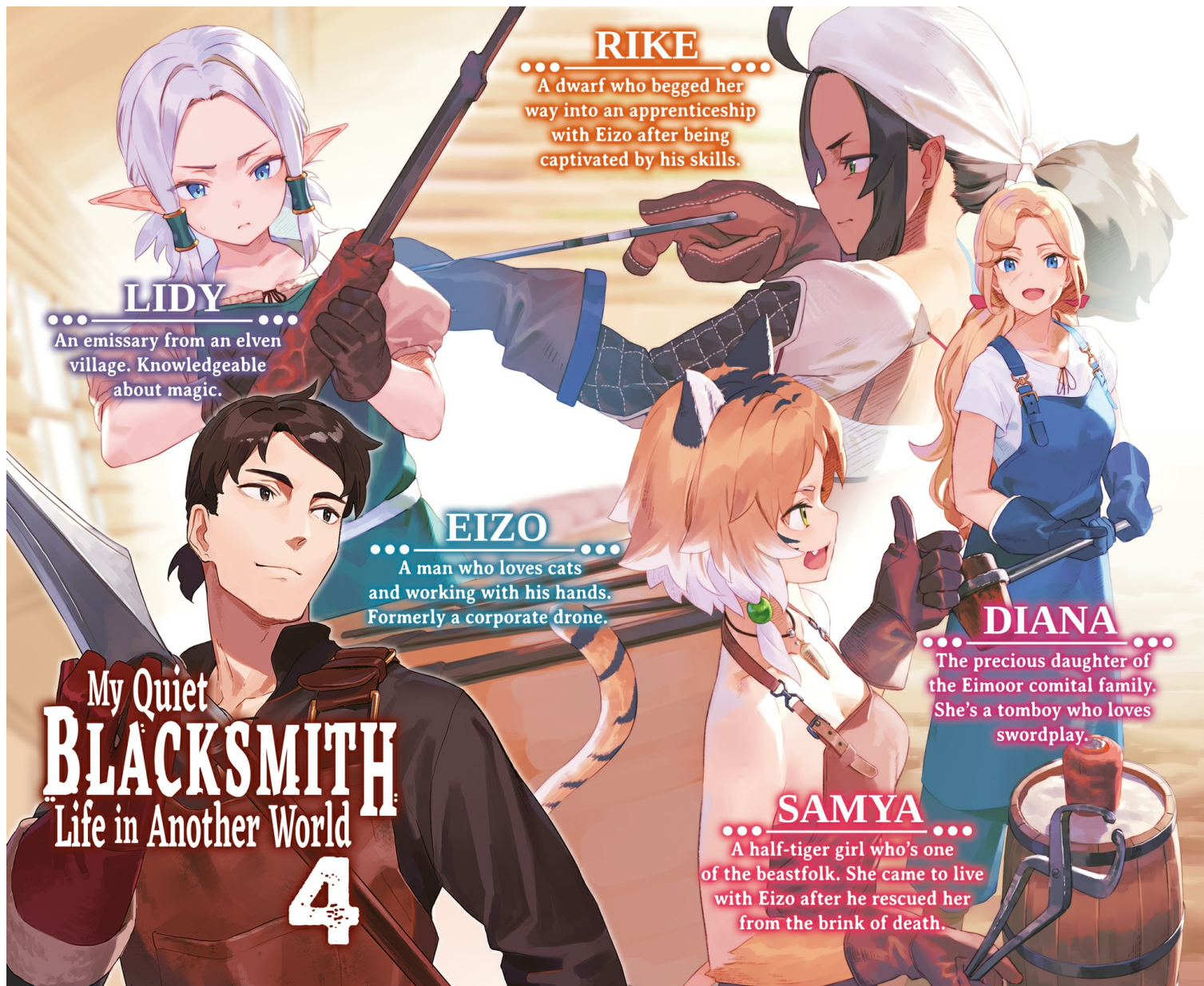
Himori Yoshi-sensei, who competes amongst the top-tier artists in this world, has continued to take the lead for the comics. I look forward to seeing the chapters every month. Thank you, thank you. The comic continues to receive high praise, so to all my readers here, please do check it out.

My gratitude goes out to my editor, S-san, who makes all of this possible through their hard work.

Friends, my mother and my little sister, and the two cats, Chama and Konbu—thank you all for cheering me on.

Above all, my biggest thanks to all the readers who have stayed with me up until now.

Let us meet again in volume five!



RIKE

A dwarf who begged her way into an apprenticeship with Eizo after being captivated by his skills.

LIDY

An emissary from an elven village. Knowledgeable about magic.

EIZO

A man who loves cats and working with his hands. Formerly a corporate drone.

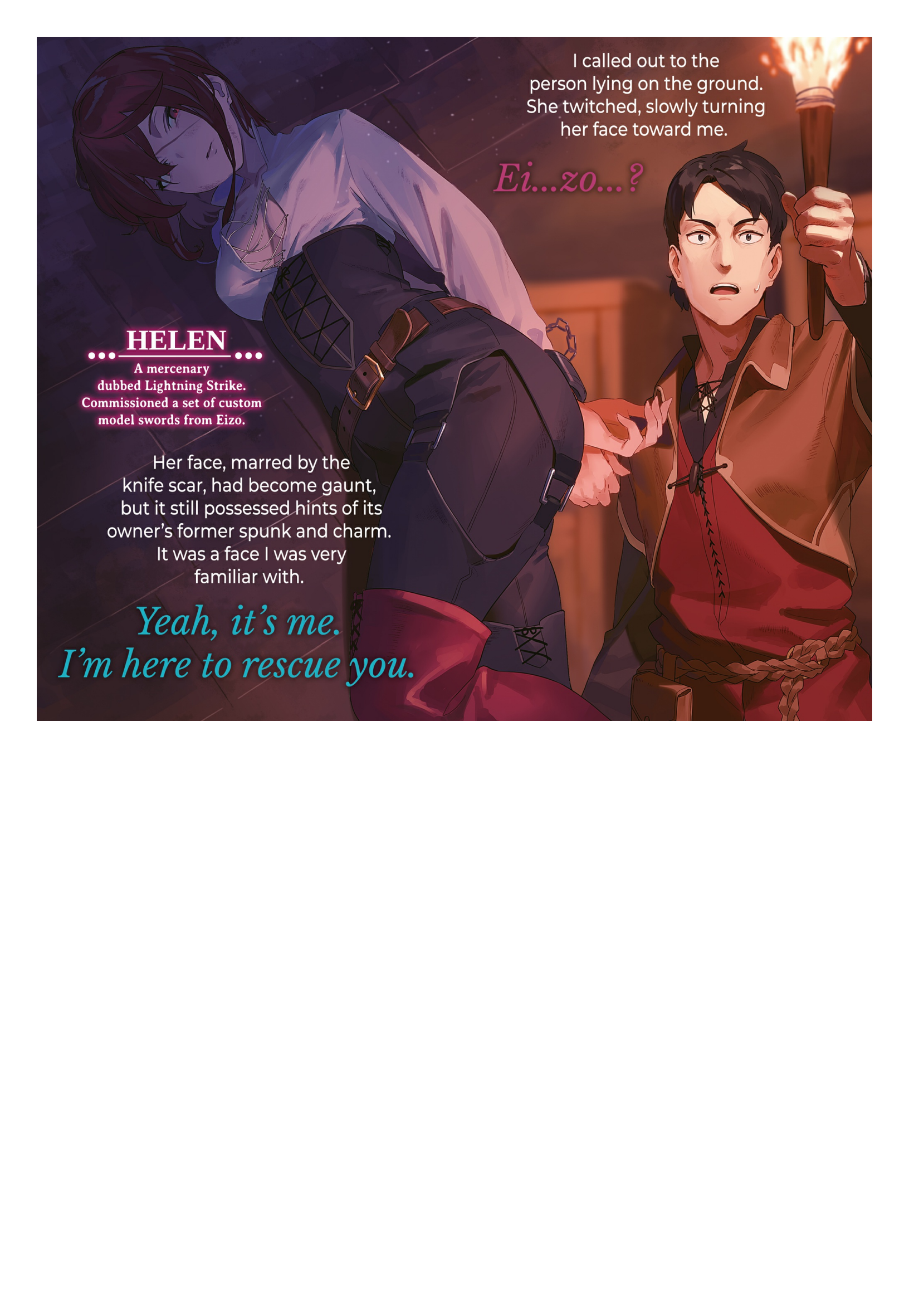
DIANA

The precious daughter of the Eimoor comital family. She's a tomboy who loves swordplay.

SAMYA

A half-tiger girl who's one of the beastfolk. She came to live with Eizo after he rescued her from the brink of death.

My Quiet BLACKSMITH Life in Another World 4

An illustration of a man with dark hair and a surprised expression, holding a flaming torch. He is looking down at a woman lying on the ground. The woman has dark hair and a pale, gaunt face with a visible scar. She is wearing a light blue shirt and dark pants with a large bag. The background is dark and atmospheric.

I called out to the person lying on the ground. She twitched, slowly turning her face toward me.

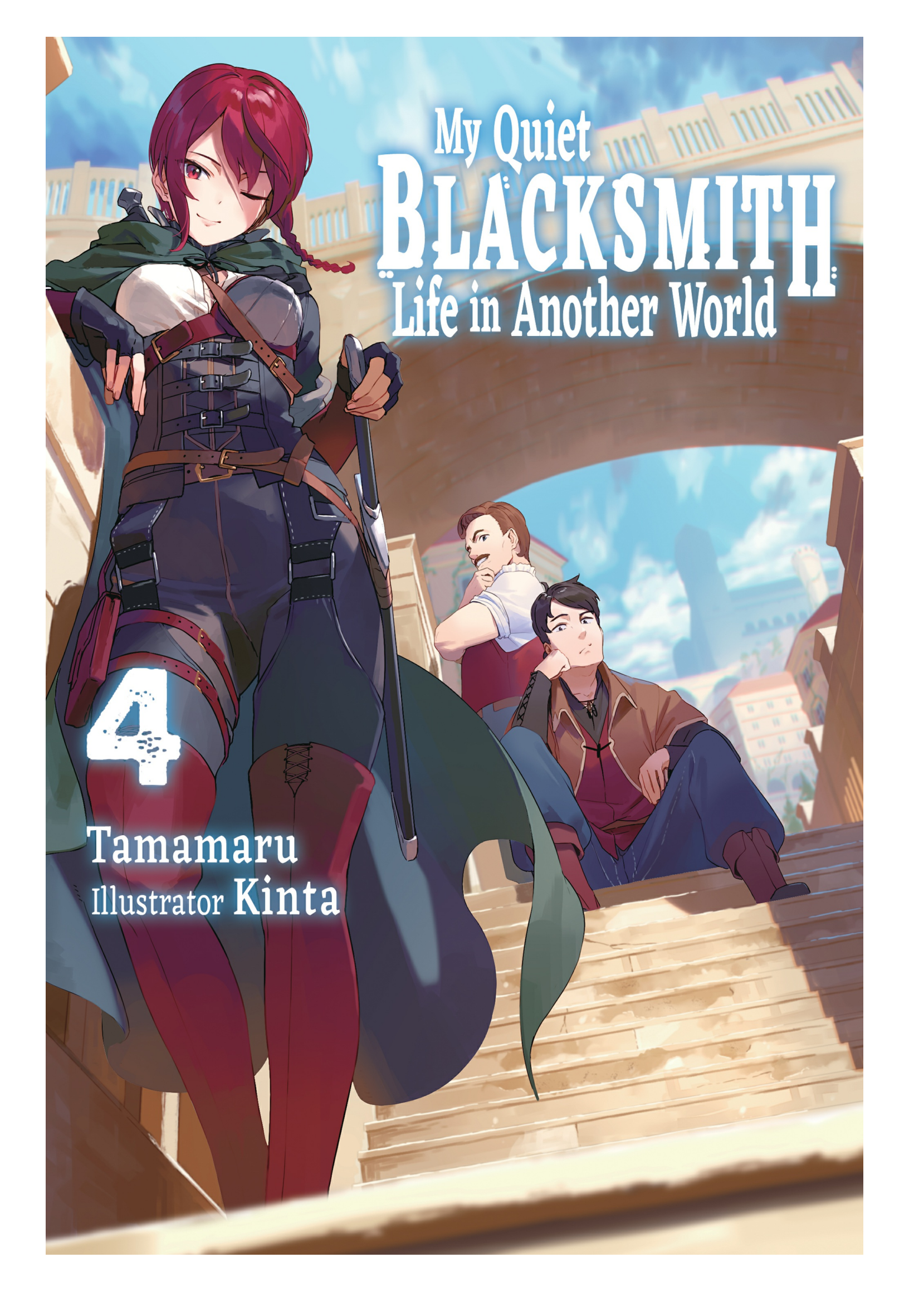
Ei...zo...?

... **HELEN** ...

A mercenary
dubbed Lightning Strike.
Commissioned a set of custom
model swords from Eizo.

Her face, marred by the knife scar, had become gaunt, but it still possessed hints of its owner's former spunk and charm. It was a face I was very familiar with.

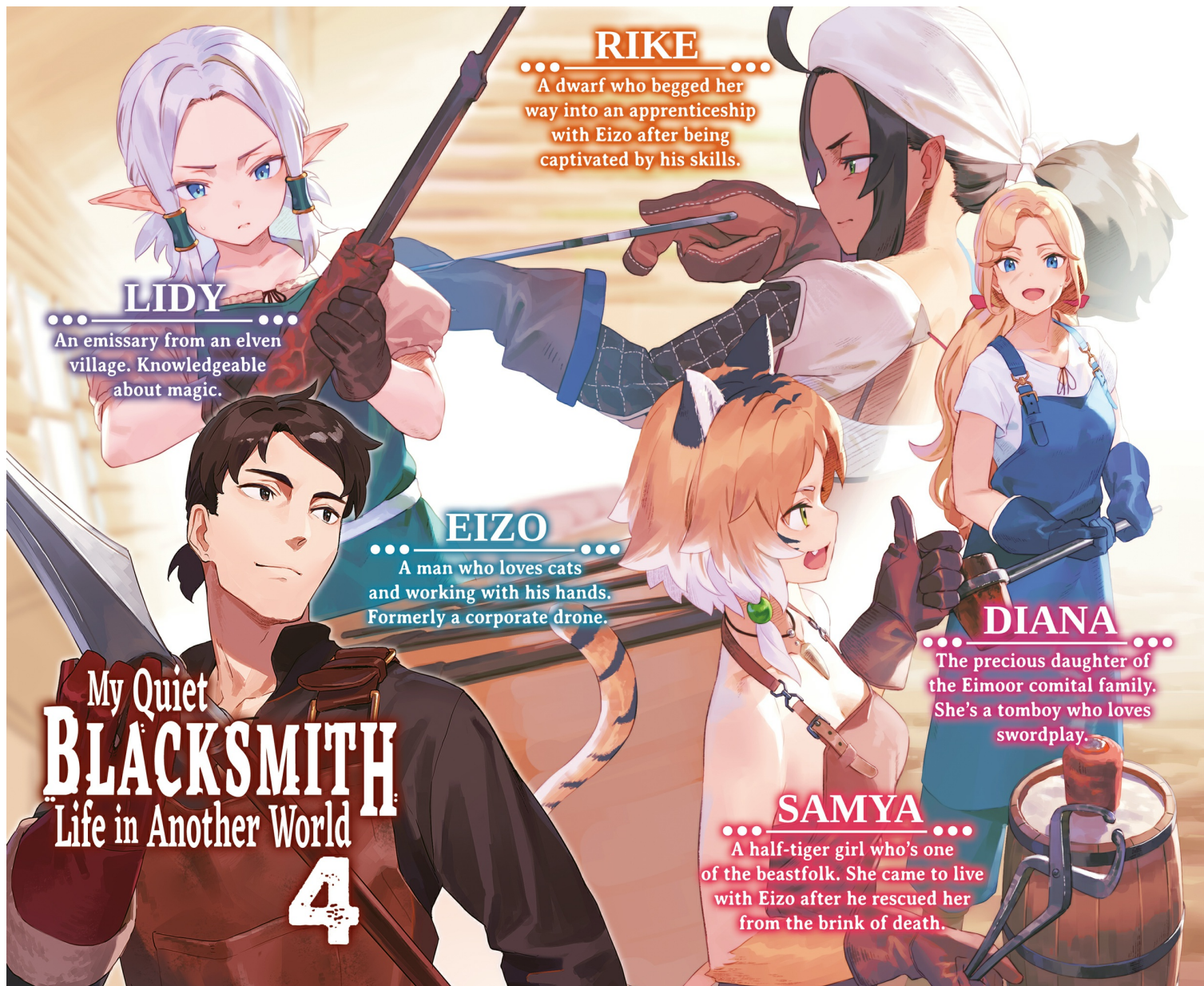
*Yeah, it's me.
I'm here to rescue you.*

The illustration depicts a young woman with vibrant red hair in a braid, wearing a dark blue and red outfit with a green cape. She stands on a wooden bridge, holding a sword. In the background, two other characters are visible: a man in a white shirt and red vest, and another man in a brown jacket and blue pants, both looking towards the woman. The setting is a bright, sunny day in a medieval-style town with stone buildings and a clear blue sky.

My Quiet **BLACKSMITH** Life in Another World

4

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta



RIKE

...
A dwarf who begged her way into an apprenticeship with Eizo after being captivated by his skills.
...

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An emissary from an elven village. Knowledgeable about magic.
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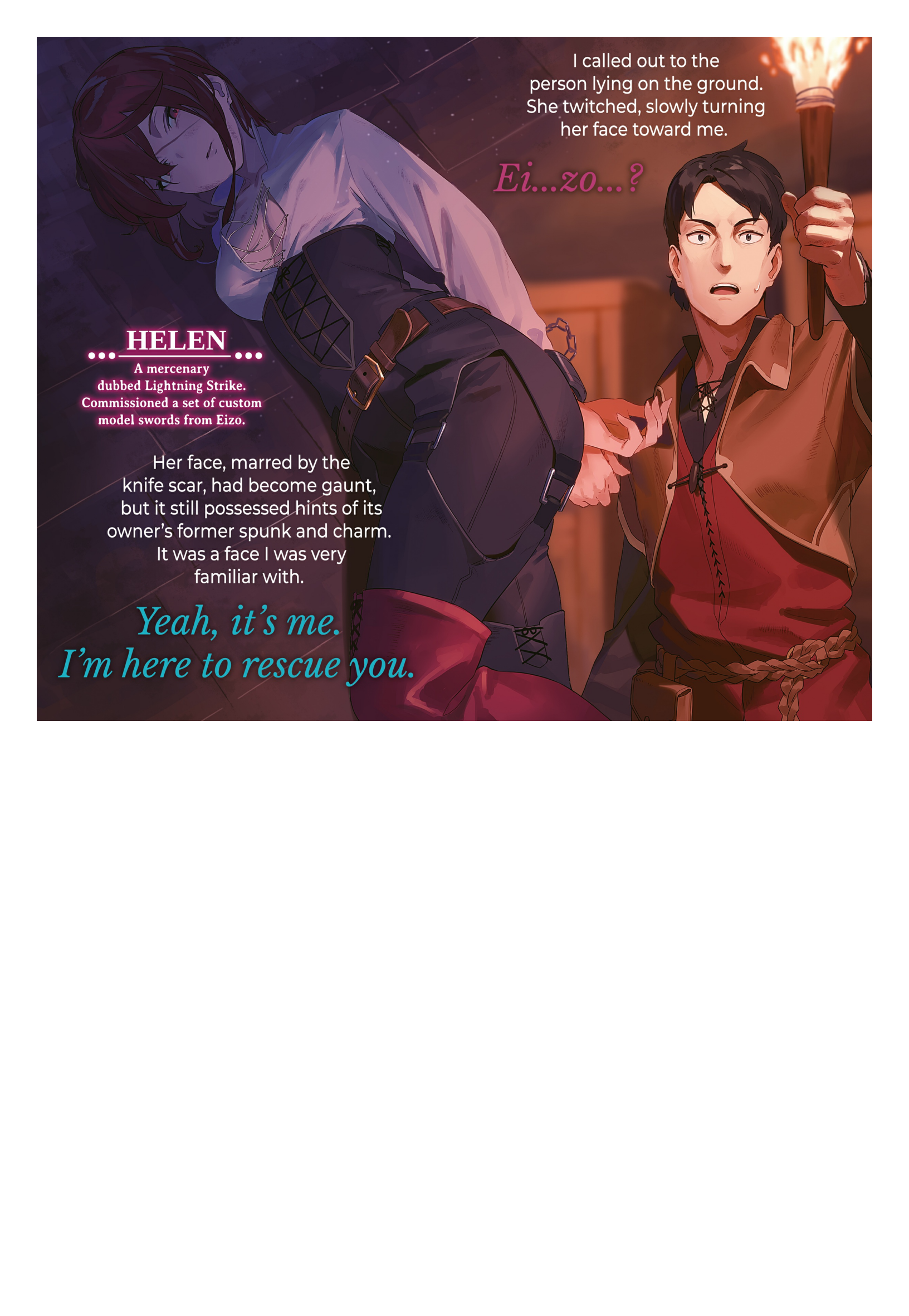
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My Quiet
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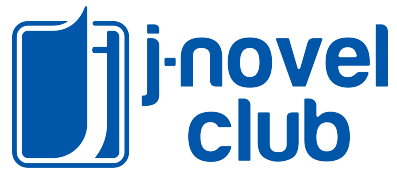
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My Quiet Blacksmith Life in Another World: Volume 4

by Tamamaru

Translated by Linda Liu Edited by C.D. Leeson

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